



REBIRTH OF THE THIEF WHO ROAMED THE WORLD

BOOK 04

Mad Snail

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Rebirth of the Thief Who Roamed The World

(重生之贼行天下)

by

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Synopsis

The world's largest VRMMO, Conviction, was almost like a second world for humanity.

It had integrated itself into the real world's economy, with both corporations and individuals seeking their fortunes through the game.

In this game, Nie Yan prided himself in his Level 180 Thief.

He could barely be considered among the top experts in the game.

Though, that was the only thing he could take pride in.

He was penniless and unable to advance in life; a situation he was forced into by the enemy of his father.

If it weren't for the little money he made by selling off items in Conviction, he would've barely been able to eat.

In the end, he chose to settle his matters once and for all.

He assassinated his father's enemy.

He lay dying shortly after being shot in the pursuit.

However, that wasn't the end of his story.

Instead, he awoke moments later to find that he had reincarnated into his past-self.

Armed with his experience and knowledge of future events, he sets out to live his life anew.

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Chapter 301 – Fighting like a Caged Beast

Just as a Thief darted toward Tyrannical, Nie Yan emerged beside him and slashed down with Zennarde's Sword.

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-100

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The Thief collapsed dead on the ground. Nie Yan could even deal fatal damage to a Fighter, to say nothing of a weak, leather-armoured Thief!

The remaining Thieves all pounced toward Nie Yan.

They're fast! Nie Yan couldn't help but remark.

At this moment, Tyrannical also cancelled the activation of his Return Scroll.

"Escape, you idiot! Why the hell did you stop your Return Scroll!?" Nie Yan cursed with a frown. The enemy had obviously come prepared. He could cover Tyrannical's escape, then teleport away himself with an Unknown Transfer Scroll.

"Abandon the boss and escape myself? If word got out, how could I face my brothers?" Tyrannical laughed. He raised his dagger and dashed toward the enemy.

Back in Calore, the Agmota Muddy Swamplands dungeon on Specialist difficulty almost exclusively belonged to Asskickers United. Since Unknown Transfer Scrolls dropped at a fairly low rate and Asskickers United generally kept such information under wraps, a guild member like Tyrannical wouldn't be privy to the knowledge that Nie Yan was in possession of an Unknown Transfer Scroll. Nor would Nie Yan casually disclose such a thing.

So naturally, when Tyrannical saw Nie Yan besieged by a squadron of Thieves, he cancelled the activation of his Return

Scroll.

“Boss, you leave first. I’ll cover you,” Tyrannical declared. Nie Yan was the face of Asskickers United. His death would be a heavy blow to the guild’s prestige. On the other hand, Tyrannical was a nobody, a guild member who ranked somewhere in the middle of the pack, a random statistic in a guild war or siege. No one would bat an eyelid if he died.

But even nobodies still had their pride and a set of principles they followed!

Although their fame would never be as eclipsing as Nie Yan’s, they weren’t petty and low!

This was for honour!

Tyrannical worshiped Nie Yan, but his loyalty was still to Asskickers United because that was his family!

Suddenly, Nie Yan felt an extreme discomfort as if something was clutching at his heart. He gazed into the distance and saw a black-robed Shadow Priest standing atop a hill with a sinister smile on his face.

It wasn’t easy for him to land this spell on Nie Yan. He had the seven Thieves distract Nie Yan and Tyrannical while he hid in a corner chanting. After six seconds, he finally succeeded in casting the spell!

Dark Magic—Shackles of Strife!

Out of all spells, this one was definitely useful for ensnaring someone. When Shackles of Strife was activated, both the caster and target would be unable to teleport away until either one of them died.

Nie Yan could still move. However, he couldn’t use items like the Unknown Transfer Scroll or Return Scroll.

After the Shadow Priest finished casting Shackles of Strife, a

large horde of Bloodlust Blades players emerged from the surrounding hilltops, completely entrapping Nie Yan.

Nie Yan never thought someone in Bloodlust Blades would have Shackles of Strife. This was a gross error in judgement!

The skills in Conviction were always full of surprises! Just when he thought everything was settled, the tables had been flipped yet again!

Tyrannical's life was in constant danger as he fought off the six Thieves. Nie Yan appeared behind one of the Thieves and struck them down with a slash from Zennarde's Sword.

When the remaining five Thieves saw Nie Yan approaching them, they quickly retreated in a panic.

What terrifying damage!

Nie Yan turned to Tyrannical with a calm gaze. "It seems this is the end of the line for me. Here, take this Unknown Transfer Scroll and get out of here."

"Leave? Boss, if I abandon you here to save my own skin, all the brothers in our guild will look down on me!" Tyrannical directly refused. A person only lived one life. It was better to live it with honour!

After thinking for a brief moment, Nie Yan didn't argue any further. He gazed at the Bloodlust Blades players who had completely sealed the area off. It appeared they planned to slowly whittle him down until he died.

"Boss, give me some face. Let me die before you. At least that way I can brag to our brothers that I went out protecting you from these bastards," Tyrannical said.

"Alright, I'll give you this bit of face." Nie Yan turned to face the thousands of Bloodlust Blades players, then revealed a proud smile. "I started playing the game a week after its launch. From starting out with nothing to becoming the guild leader of Asskickers

United, I've never died once to another player. For the sake of killing me alone, Bloodlust Blades has mobilized several thousand players. Even if I die here, it should be fine, right?"

"Yes, there's nothing disgraceful about it, at all!" Tyrannical nodded vigorously as his nose turned sour.

Nie Yan was the hero of this generation. In the entire game, who could kill him 1v1? Even if he died here today, it wouldn't be a blemish on his reputation!

"Even if I die here, I'm still the guild leader of Asskickers United. I definitely won't dishonour the guild's name! I'll take out as many of them as I can with me!" Nie Yan declared. Since things had reached this point, it wouldn't be in his style to just sit back and resign himself to fate!

"I, Tyrannical of the Asskickers United's Hundred Thieves, also won't let down the boss or the guild!" Tyrannical bravely declared. Even if he died, he had no regrets following his leader, Nie Yan.

The players from Bloodlust Blades gradually approached, sealing off the surrounding area. Players of every class formed a human barricade with the Fighters holding heavy shields at the very front, while the Mages and Priests were at the back.

Despite being surrounded by several thousand players and locked down by Shackles of Strife, they were still worried Nie Yan might escape.

To go to such lengths for a single Thief, it was definitely a first.

Nie Yan swept his gaze over the crowd of Bloodlust Blades players, then said in a clear voice, "You bunch of dogs, I'm right here where you want me. Any of you who aren't convinced, come up and have a taste of my sword!"

Even though Dragon King Zennarde was a Tyrant, very few people were actually aware of his backstory. His sudden rise from obscurity only started with 10 people. After conquering several

dozen tribes neighbouring his territory relying on nothing but himself, he embarked on his journey for world domination. One time he was ambushed in the Karu Plains, one against 100,000, and he fought for 10 days and 10 nights.

While wielding Zennarde's Sword, a feeling of one man against the world also surfaced in Nie Yan's heart.

His blade would cut down anyone who dared to approach him!

Nie Yan glanced at his skill bar. Adjudicator of God, God's Grace, and a few other of his trump cards were still there. The rest had all been used. He didn't have many skills left that could be used, so what did it matter if he used a couple more?

As for unequipping his equipment and going forward to commit suicide, Nie Yan had no such plan. Perhaps he might do this if he were a solo player. But as the guild leader of Asskickers United, he absolutely wouldn't do anything of the sort!

Despite being trapped, Nie Yan's domineering attitude still caused the players from Bloodlust Blades to tremble. Although Nie Yan was their enemy, this didn't influence the respect they had for him.

Among the crowd, Maple Blazeheart gazed at Nie Yan with a hint of admiration. No wonder the players of Asskickers United held him in such high esteem! As things stood, even if the Mad Rogue died here today, it would be a hero's death.

「Everyone, hold!」Maple Blazeheart ordered through voice chat. Everybody halted and looked toward Maple Blazeheart, awaiting his command.

Maple Blazeheart's word undoubtedly carried a great influence in Bloodlust Blades. Even Bloodlust Mad Blade had to show him respect.

Nie Yan looked at Maple Blazeheart in the crowd. He was surprised. Why did these players suddenly stop? But realization

quickly daunted on him. So it was because of him!

As Maple Blazeheart gazed at Nie Yan, who didn't show the slightest bit of fear despite being surrounded on all sides, a feeling of respect surfaced in his heart.

「To show respect to the guild leader of Asskickers United, Mad Rogue Nirvana Flame, I want only Squad 25 to go forward! Everyone else, remain on standby!」Maple Blazeheart ordered through voice chat. A group of players walked forward from the crowd. They numbered around 60 or 70. All of them were ordinary players, their levels only being around Level 40.

Maple Blazeheart counted the number of people in this group. There were 62 players in total!

「Engage!」

The 62 players rushed toward Tyrannical and Nie Yan. A group of 30 or so Fighters led the charge.

Nie Yan narrowed his eyes. He never expected this turn of events. His impression of Maple Blazeheart improved greatly. This person wasn't the type who regularly schemed and backstabbed others.

The way a person conducted themselves was important.

“Boss, I'll go up first!” Tyrannical entered stealth and dashed toward the group of players.

Truthfully, whether he was stealthed or not didn't make the slightest bit of difference.

Balls of light shot up into the air, illuminating the area below. Nothing could be hidden from this radiance!

Nie Yan activated God's Grace as a barrier of light enveloped him. He entered stealth and dashed toward a Mage at lightning speed.

The Fighters wanted to intercept Nie Yan. But he was too fast. He easily slipped through the gaps between them and pounced toward the Mages in the backline.

With a slash of his sword, the first Mage was instantly cut down.

The terrifying damage caused the surrounding players to reel back in terror.

A shower of spells rained down on Nie Yan, exploding on impact.

Nie Yan slashed down yet again. The blazing attack of Zennarde's Sword struck another Mage, killing them instantly!

Under the intense bombardment of spells, Nie Yan's Radiant Barrier shattered into shards of light.

At this moment, Nie Yan activated Adjudicator of God and drank an Intermediate Health Potion. He charged through the hail of spells and pounced on the Priests further in the back, throwing the group into complete chaos.

「Boss, it seems I'll be leaving first.」 After cutting down a Mage, Tyrannical was feared by a Thief. He had lost complete control of his body. Six Fighters moved in to surround him.「Klang! Klang! Klang」He was pummeled to death with one Shield Bash after another.

With Tyrannical dead, Nie Yan made his last stand and fought like a caged beast!

Chapter 302 – Reinforcements

Nie Yan brushed off the spells bombarding him as he killed a Priest with every slash of Zennarde's Sword, slaughtering over seven in the blink of an eye!

Nie Yan appeared incredibly valiant. Heads would roll wherever he stepped! No one was his match, especially not these cloth-armoured casters who fell after a single attack.

The spectating crowd of players from Bloodlust Blades was left breathless. It would be a nightmare to face off against a Thief like this.

Mad Rogue Nirvana Flame really did live up to his reputation!

Who in the entire world would dare to challenge him?

"If possible, I'd like to try facing him one day. That is, without the magic immunity," Maple Blazeheart mused. Nie Yan was absolutely a worthy opponent.

Maple Blazeheart might stand a chance against Nie Yan if he didn't activate God's Blessing or Adjudicator of God, but otherwise it would be impossible for him to achieve victory.

At this moment, Maple Blazeheart received a call. It was from Bloodlust Mad Blade.

「Blazeheart, what the hell are you doing!？」Mad Blade asked gravely.

「I'm paying tribute to the Mad Rogue!」Blazeheart replied. A Thief who could reach such heights should be given the utmost respect.

「Cut the crap! I want him dead within the next 2 minutes. I refuse to believe he can survive getting swarmed by several hundred Fighters. He'll be dead in no time!」Mad Blade ordered in a sinister tone.

「3,000 people ganging up on a single person, is there really any meaning to it? Even if we win, it's nothing to be proud about,」Blazeheart rebuked, not backing down in the slightest. He was the principled sort.

「I don't give a shit if there's any meaning to it! I'll sweep away those who dare to block my path! No matter what method I have to employ, assassination, ambush, or ganging up! Take out Nirvana Flame, right now! Fuck! There's movement over on the side of Asskickers United! Hurry up!」

「No, It's disgraceful. You can pass down the order, but I won't be the one doing it!」Blazeheart replied in a resolute tone. He refused to betray his principles. It wasn't the first time these two butted heads over such a matter.

「Get the fuck out of my sight!」Mad Blade erupted with fury. Stubborn bastard! What are principles worth in a war? Squat!

Maple Blazeheart has been demoted from Vice Guild Leader.

Mad Blade gave the order to all members of Bloodlust Blades present on the scene: Kill Nirvana Flame immediately!

Nie Yan stood his ground while holding Zennarde's Sword. With only about 500 health remaining, he had used everything on him. Even the Combat Bandages were gone. Bloodied corpses littered the ground beneath his feet. He had slaughtered 26 players altogether, almost all of whom were Mages felled with a single slash!

Nie Yan looked quite terrifying. His name was branded a bright crimson while his gear appeared to be dyed red with the blood of his victims. He had sunk into a killing frenzy, mowing down everyone in his path. A dense murderous aura emanated from his body, causing him to resemble a god of slaughter who struck fear into the hearts of all those that saw him.

The remaining players didn't dare to get close. Nie Yan's attacks were too frightening. Even tanky Fighters would fall victim to his blade.

At this moment, the spectating crowd started making a move. Several hundred Fighters with their heavy shields raised moved in to surround Nie Yan, forming a tighter and tighter encirclement.

Nie Yan would have no chance of making it out alive if he was swarmed by these Fighters. Even moving his body would be difficult, let alone getting off an attack.

Watching the enemy slowly tightening the noose, Nie Yan knew the end was nigh.

The wall of shields gradually closed in on Nie Yan, coming to a halt at roughly 5 meters away. If not for Adjudicator of God, he would have long since died. For him to have survived this long was already an impressive feat. He had at least taken down several dozen others with him.

Nie Yan forced a wry smile onto his face. All of a sudden, he felt like he could somewhat empathize with the [ancient Warlord Xiang Yu](#) as he committed suicide. A lifetime of glory, yet in vain he died.

Nie Yan thought he was safe because he had the Unknown Transfer Scroll at hand. His defeat was all due to the Shackles of Strife! He believed very few Shadow Priests, if any at all, had already obtained this skill at the current stage of the game. However, mishaps were inevitable!

Ever since things were set into motion, it appeared Mad Blade had always planned to use Shackles of Strife to deal with Nie Yan!

He was thoroughly outsmarted this time!

Death was fast approaching. However, just as Nie Yan closed his eyes in acceptance of his fate, the enemy ranks were suddenly thrown into chaos.

Nie Yan opened his eyes in confusion. Did something just

happen?

Dense clouds of magic blotted out the sky. A heavy pressure descended on the players from Bloodlust Blades, causing them to panic.

“Shit! Who’s casting that spell?”

“Advanced Magic! Reinforcements from Asskickers United!”

The mob of Bloodlust Blades players almost instantly lost all sense of unity as they trampled each other in search for safety.

Elsewhere, a group of over a dozen players charged into the forces of Bloodlust Blades, killing them left and right as they made their way to the center.

Bladelight and Smoke Stub led this group. With a Charge, Bladelight barrelled through six players. Smoke Stub followed suit and chained his Charge with a Whirlwind Slash, sending another seven players flying away.

Cold Peak, Yi Yan, and the others followed close behind, paving their path with blood. They took care of the players on the side, causing blood to fall like rain. Sun’s figure also emerged on the battlefield. He had just finished killing six players.

“Boss!”

“We’re here to save you!”

“Big bro, we’re here!”

The team was all here. As Nie Yan looked at the mass of friendly faces, he couldn’t help but feel moved.

“Such a lively event and you didn’t invite us, aren’t you ashamed of yourself?” Smoke Stub smiled. This world was truly full of coincidences. Back then, Nie Yan had led a group of players to rescue him and the other members of Withered Leaf from Azure Falling Sky. Now their positions were reversed.

This was just how relationships between people worked: Give

and receive. If not for Nie Yan's efforts to save Withered Leaf from Azure Falling Sky back then, they wouldn't have become faithful members of Asskicked United.

"No matter the circumstances, remember that you're not alone. You still have all of us in Asskickers United!" Bladelight faintly smiled.

Nie Yan was touched by Bladelight words. It was true. He was never alone. He still had his brothers in the guild! This held true just as much for him as it did for them!

"I'm sorry," Nie Yan sincerely apologized. He had grown so accustomed to solving problems on his own that he didn't want to trouble others. Bladelight's words reminded him that he had created a guild for just this reason! He couldn't possibly face every danger alone!

The black cloud finally condensed as a torrent of fireballs poured down from the sky. The blaze wreaked havoc over the battlefield, instantly turning over 600 players from Bloodlust Blades into rays of light. The destructive power of Advanced Magic was terrifying.

One after another, area-of-effect spells rained hell upon Bloodlust Blades, quickly crippling most of them. The raging inferno voraciously devoured the previously vast crowd.

"How many of you came?" Nie Yan asked Smoke Stub.

"Not many, a little over 20. These guys aren't so tough." Smoke Stub swept his gaze over the crowd of players from Bloodlust Blades, an expression of contempt on his face.

No one could withstand the might of Advanced Magic. Let alone 3,000 players, even a force of 10,000 players would be thoroughly wiped out by such an intense barrage!

Recently, Bloodlust Blades had created no small amount of trouble for Asskickers United, causing them to suffer some losses. However, this was only the case because Asskickers United's elites

had never gotten involved. But now that the peak players had shown up, Bloodlust Blades could give up any dreams of killing Nie Yan. Numbers advantage? No problem: just throw Advanced Magic at it!

Sun chained several skills to cut down a Mage, then walked up to Nie Yan.

“You smelly brat, where have you been these days?” Nie Yan gazed at Sun with a smile. The players from Bloodlust Blades were fleeing like rats. Asskickers United’s Advanced Magic combined with Tang Yao’s area-of-effect spells were simply too fierce.

In an instant, 3,000 players were reduced to just a few hundred.

“I went to outfit myself with better gear. Big bro, check out this sweet set I have now!” Sun veritably bubbled with excitement as he showed off his new Level 45 armor. His azure leather outfit was truly a treasure for control thieves.

Sun was already Level 47. He could even rank near the top of the leaderboards. During this time, he had vastly improved his combat techniques. His movements were much smoother than before.

Looking at everyone’s levels, Nie Yan figured he should start raising his level again. Although he wasn’t likely to lose to any of them, he would still be at a huge disadvantage facing a Level 40+ player at Level 30.

Bladelight, Smoke Stub, Cold Peak, and a few others began to clean up the surviving stragglers. Slowly but surely, they picked off the rest of the fleeing players.

After the area-of-effect spells stopped, a group of players made their way over from a distant hilltop. They were Tang Yao, Painted Muslin, Summer Bug, and the other casters.

Clad in a flowing white robe, Painted Muslin stood in the center and was by far the most eye-catching.

“Hey, pretty lady, how about you give me a Heal?” Nie Yan

laughed. Since joining the guild, Painted Muslin had also familiarized herself with everyone.

“500 Merit Points, no exceptions!” Painted Muslin cheekily replied with a smile.

“So expensive!?” Nie Yan faked a bitter look.

“You’re the guild leader. Don’t tell me you can’t even take out this much?”

“Fine, fine. 500 points it is.”

These team members didn’t actually care about such a small amount of Merit Points. They were just joking around with each other.

A ray of white light landed on Nie Yan’s body, restoring his health to full. He looked around. The 3,000 attackers from Bloodlust Blades were now almost completely wiped out, with only a handful remaining.

“Let’s clean up the survivors and go home,” Nie Yan said. There was no telling when more players from Bloodlust Blades would arrive. He suddenly vanished. A moment later, he reappeared over 10 meters away and slashed down with Zennarde’s Sword, killing a stray Priest from Bloodlust Blades.

A reference to [Chinese history/mythology](#).

Chapter 303 - Shadow Killer

With his decade's worth of experience in Conviction serving as a solid foundation, Nie Yan's skills only improved further after his numerous breakthroughs in this life. Add this to the ever increasing quality of his gear, and he was quickly becoming an unapproachable existence. Save for some godly-level characters, no ordinary players would even dream of challenging him.

The 20 or so players from Asskickers United were invincible as they swept away the remnants forces of Bloodlust Blades, especially Tang Yao, Undying Scoundrel, Natural Fiend, and the other Mages whose area-of-effect spells wiped out numerous fleeing groups.

Each of them was strong in their own right, but their outstanding teamwork allowed them to explode with even more astonishing power.

The players from Bloodlust Blades were completely routed, and were fleeing with their tails tucked between their legs.

Nirvana Flame, Young Sparrow Hawk, Aqua Smoke Stub, Resplendent Bladelight... they were some of the most famous names in the game. An appearance from just one of them would already be a huge deterrent, let alone when the whole gang was brought together.

Clad in their heavy plate armours, Smoke Stub, Bladelight, and the other Warriors resembled tanks, steamrolling through everything in their path and leaving a trail of corpses behind them.

Nie Yan felled another player from Bloodlust Blades with a slash of Zennarde's Sword. At this moment, he felt a pair of eyes on him. Although the feeling was fleeting, he still took notice.

His high Awareness could help him detect even the faintest trace of a threat!

A Thief! This was the first thought to surface in Nie Yan's mind.

However, Nie Yan couldn't determine the other party's position. Conviction was full of different skills. Encountering a Thief with a skill that enhanced their stealthing ability was nothing out of the ordinary. Since he was being watched, he just had to be vigilant.

A Thief who could remain undetected while in Nie Yan's presence was definitely no slouch.

Nie Yan stretched out his senses to their limit in preparation to deal with a sneak attack at a moment's notice.

Now!

Nie Yan's pupils shone with an enigmatic light while the veins around his eyes bulged out. His gaze swept over every corner of the vast wasteland, but he failed to find any trace of the opponent even after a long time. So, he could only give up his search.

Not too far away, a Shadow Priest gazed anxiously in Nie Yan's direction.

This Shadow Priest appeared to be around 30 years old. His lanky figure was garbed in black robes, his nose curved downwards like a hook, and his narrow eyes constantly shifted from one side to the other. In fact, he quite closely resembled a rat.

It was precisely this Shadow Priest who had cast Shackles of Strife earlier. Nie Yan naturally had no intention of letting this fellow off after spotting him. For the past two hours, he couldn't use Return Scrolls or Unknown Transfers Scrolls. This was the terrifying effect of an Advanced Magic, and it would continue to persist until either one of them died.

As the Shadow Priest turned to flee, Nie Yan disappeared into stealth and went into pursuit.

Nie Yan shortened the gap in an instant, with only about five meters separating them.

Just as Nie Yan drew close, the Shadow Priest suddenly turned around and threw an orb of light up into the air. Beneath the piercing radiance, Nie Yan's silhouette was revealed.

Nie Yan was no more than two meters away!

A sinister smile surfaced on the Shadow Priest's face.

"I've been waiting for this moment!" the Shadow Priest cackled as he waved his staff and targeted Nie Yan with a Slow Curse, reducing his speed by a slight fraction.

Despite this, Nie Yan was still rapidly closing in on the Shadow Priest.

Seeing the Shadow Priest's scheming expression, a thought flashed across Nie Yan's mind. He quickly activated Mind Immune from the Medal of the Ten Holy Paladins.

The Shadow Priest opened his mouth as an ear-piercing screech escaped his throat.

Howl of Terror!

You're practically right in my face. Let's see you escape this! The Shadow Priest sneered. However, he was shocked to discover that his Howl of Terror had no effect on Nie Yan. His terrified eyes reflected the dark glow of black flames as Zennarde's Sword came slashing down on him.

Blood splattered the ground as Nie Yan killed the Shadow Priest.

Nie Yan suddenly started running around aimlessly like a headless chicken, feigning as if he was actually under the influence of Howl of Terror.

Nie Yan's acting was very realistic, his timing flawless.

From the point of an observer, it appeared Nie Yan was struck by Howl of Terror while in mid-slash. This was why the Shadow Priest still died.

A silhouette emerged out of nowhere beside Nie Yan and struck

at his forehead with a Concussive Blow.

The assailant was precisely the Thief who had been stalking Nie Yan this whole time!

This Thief's actions were quick and ruthless. With a glance, Nie Yan could tell his opponent this time around was a tough cookie!

Nie Yan's lips curved into a cold smile. Got you!

The only reason he pretended to be under the effects of Howl of Terror just now was to lure out this Thief. It was a success. His performance had fooled the eyes of the other party.

However, Nie Yan didn't dare to be careless. His opponent's attacks were lightning-fast and carried an overbearing killing intent.

Nie Yan quickly raised his dagger to parry.

「Klang!」

He immediately retaliated with a Concussive Blow of his own.

The Thief's expression flickered with surprise. He never expected that Nie Yan could still defend himself.

Nie Yan instantly recognized his opponent who was clad in a set of ash-gray leather armour. It was Shadow Killer! Despite being caught off-guard, Shadow Killer's countenance was tranquil, as if this exchange was nothing more than a small diversion.

Shadow Killer's eyes beamed with killing intent. He vanished into thin air, causing Nie Yan's attack to miss.

A brief moment later, Nie Yan felt a biting cold at the back of his neck. He's fast!

Just as Nie Yan was about to react, he discovered his body was completely paralyzed. A dagger came stabbing towards the back of his head.

At this life-or-death moment, Nie Yan used Gale Step. He took

advantage of its first three seconds of invincibility upon activation to nullify Shadow Killer's attack.

Two seconds later, Nie Yan finally regained control of his body. He quickly pulled back to open up some distance. When he looked back, Shadow Killer had disappeared like a wisp of smoke.

Nie Yan swept his gaze over the surroundings. He could no longer detect the slightest trace of Shadow Killer's presence.

Even though this was only their first exchange, Nie Yan still felt great pressure. It appeared Shadow Killer's motto was to kill on the first strike, immediately retreating upon failure. He was an assassin through and through. Unlike many others who respected a set of unspoken rules, he would use any means, fair or foul, to achieve his goals. This was why so many people fell at his hands in the previous timeline.

Nie Yan broke out in a cold sweat. If it wasn't for his quick use of Gale Step, he would've lost his life.

Nie Yan greatly envied this kind of position, an assassin who constantly tested his limits by targeting one expert after the next. But unfortunately, he would never be able to take on such a role because he was already the guild leader of Asskickers United.

Despite confirming that Shadow Killer had left, Nie Yan still remained vigilant. He had already been ambushed once. Who knew when Shadow Killer would show up again. Perhaps next time he wouldn't be so lucky. Being targeted by such a player was no pleasant matter. I need to find a way to deal with him. His stealthing ability is too frightening!

Smoke Stub, Bladelight, and the others were hunting down the remaining survivors from Bloodlust Blades. When they noticed Nie Yan had encountered trouble, they rushed over to him.

"Are you okay?" Bladelight asked. He had just seen a Thief stab Nie Yan in the back of the head. However, Nie Yan was unharmed.

This left him a bit curious.

“Who was that Thief? He looked familiar,” Smoke Stub asked. As a professional player, how could he not know Shadow Killer’s appearance? It was just that the situation was too hectic, and he couldn’t get a good look.

“It was Shadow Killer!” Nie Yan replied. This was their first exchange. Even though it was brief, it was a wake-up call for him. If not for his quick reactions, by the time Smoke Stub, Bladelight, and the others arrived, he would’ve already become an ice-cold corpse. Not to mention Shadow Killer had used a crowd-control skill similar to Intimidate. He would definitely have to watch out for that the next time around.

“No wonder! So it was him!” Smoke Stub exclaimed in shock. He felt his blood run cold. Shadow Killer was definitely one of the most difficult professional players to deal with. He was a master at stealth. Once he took action, he would always be going in for the kill. If he didn’t succeed in one move, he would immediately retreat and await the next opportune moment to strike again. So long as you didn’t die, he would continue biding his time.

Just at this moment, Nie Yan received a message. It was from Shadow Killer!

「Not half-bad, but you won’t be so lucky next time.」

When Nie Yan wanted to reply, he discovered Shadow Killer had blocked off all communications.

Shadow Killer, huh... Nie Yan faintly smiled. It would be a good opportunity to hone his skills by duking it out with such a legendary figure. I won’t let you get away so easily next time!

With these two Thieves facing off against each other, one would inevitably end up on the floor!

Nie Yan withdrew from his daydreaming. He swept his gaze over the surroundings. Many players from Bloodlust Blades had died at

their hands, while those that survived had long since fled away.

“Pick up whatever loot you can,” Nie Yan ordered. “We only have about a minute. Then we immediately set out for the south!”

「Forces from Bloodlust Blades are currently moving towards you from the north. Hurry up and escape before it's too late!」Guo Huai frantically informed.

「Got it,」Nie Yan replied.

Chapter 304 – Pursuit

「Do you want help?」Guo Huai asked. He had several thousand guild members on standby. Nie Yan only had to give the word, and they would teleport over. Even though the transport fee was steep, around 1 gold per player, they could easily bear the cost thanks to the support of the Dragonsoar Financial Group.

「No need. Glory City is the territory of Bloodlust Blades. No matter how much help arrives, we'll always be outmanned and outgunned. It's best if we minimize our losses. Besides, Smoke Stub, Bladelight, the others, and I should be able to get away. Just closely monitor the enemy's movements for now,」Nie Yan replied. As long as he knew the position of Bloodlust Blades' forces, there should be no worry of being surrounded in such a large map. He quickly gathered everyone together.

Glory City was to the north, so the safest option would be to head south.

“Everyone, get on your mounts!” Nie Yan ordered. Being the strongest members of Asskickers United, everyone in the group naturally had the best horses the guild could offer.

They summoned their mounts one after another, all of which were high-quality warhorses with movement speed bonuses of 200%. This was one of the perks provided by the guild. With a good mount, players could save a lot on travel time which would otherwise be better spent on levelling.

Mounts made things much more convenient. The group galloped away on horseback, leaving a cloud of dust behind.

Nie Yan swept his gaze over these team members. Aside from Young Seven, Painted Muslin, and the other Priests, the rest all had bright red names. If they died to the forces of Bloodlust Blades, it would be a huge blow to Asskickers United!

The group sped across the wasteland as the scenery blurred past them.

...

Back in Red River Stronghold, Bloodlust Mad Blade flew into a fit of rage after finding out Nie Yan had escaped. He couldn't believe such a setback had occurred in his previously flawless plan. It was now almost impossible to prevent Nie Yan and the others from fleeing!

However, these were more than 20 elites from Asskickers United, not to mention most of them were branded with red names! How could Mad Blade willingly abandon this thick, juicy slab of meat dangling just out of reach?

Even Mad Blade had to admit that most guilds couldn't match Asskickers United's elite line-up. For a large guild to have a dozen or so top-notch players was already impressive. But Asskickers United had more than 60 such players, a fact that left him greatly depressed. Finding an expert generally involved picking out someone with promise, then spending a ton of resources to provide them with the environment to grow. This heavily relied on a guild leader's eye for talent. There were many instances where a guild would go through all this effort only to end up with a player that was just so-so.

Up until now, Mad Blade had only discovered around 10 talented players whose skill ranked among the top 500 within the entire Viridian Empire. But according to his investigations, Asskickers United had at least 70 such players, about seven times that of Bloodlust Blades! Almost all of Calore's elites were congregated in Asskickers United. The difference was like night and day.

It was no wonder why Bloodlust Blades treated Asskickers United with such hostility. If a guild like that was allowed to grow, there would be no place left for anyone else to stand in the future!

"Boss, they're fleeing south!"

“We must kill them, at all costs! Send our squadron of Thieves to hold them up so that our forces can catch up!” Mad Blade ordered in a harsh tone. Nie Yan’s group should’ve already used up all their Advanced Magic to wipe out those previous 3,000 players, meaning they were currently at their weakest. Now was the most suitable time to take action!

Bloodlust Blades also had a Thief squadron of their own. It was established after witnessing the success of Asskickers United’s Hundred Thieves. Naturally, they couldn’t hold a candle to the Hundred Thieves. But what they lacked in quality, they made up in manpower with over 500 members in total. Not to mention they were still hand-picked from the guild, and highly mobile with the mounts provided to them. When such a large force carried out missions, their success rate was quite high.

Mad Blade dispatched a large number of people after Nie Yan’s group. Furthermore, players from Bloodlust Blades levelling in various maps also dropped what they were doing to join in on the pursuit.

Glory City was the territory of Bloodlust Blades. How could they allow players from Asskickers United to do as they pleased?

Mad Blade guided the overall situation from the guild headquarters, mobilizing guild members from all over to chase after Nie Yan’s group.

More and more players came together to form a giant encirclement. It wouldn’t be easy for Nie Yan’s group to slaughter their way out.

Nie Yan’s group fled south out of the barren wasteland. A wide open plain appeared before them, resembling a sea of green gently swaying in the wind. They occasionally spotted one or two Level 40 Dark Bulls grazing on the grass.

At this moment, a horde of Bloodlust Blades players emerged up ahead. The Warriors and Paladins were at the front while the

Mages and Priests were in the back. The players quickly moved to surround Nie Yan's group.

"Dismount, we're engaging the enemy!" Nie Yan ordered. After which he recalled his Faulkner Warhorse and disappeared from sight with Shadow Waltz.

The group members dismounted one after another.

Sun and One Strike Vow also disappeared into stealth. A Thief was the deadliest while in the shadows! They were the most unpredictable force on the battlefield!

"You bastards. No matter how many of you come, you'll end up dead just the same!" Undying Scoundrel exclaimed after seeing the enemy's numbers. He had already used up his Advanced Magic. He condensed a blazing sphere in his palm.

Scorching Flame Explosion!

A fireball streaked across the battlefield like a meteor.「Bang!」It blasted a Fighter in the chest, killing him instantly and sending his corpse flying away.

Undying Scoundrel wore the Flame Dancer Set. As soon as he took action, it badly frightened the players from Bloodlust Blades.

In the blink of an eye, Smoke Stub, Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and the other frontliners clashed with the 60 Fighters from Bloodlust Blades, while the Priests on both sides frantically provided healing.

Bladelight let out a war cry and sent three Fighters staggering back with a Shield Bash.

These Fighters were simply no match for Bladelight!

Lofty Shadow also faced multiple opponents at once. Spells bombarded his body, but they only dealt around 20-30 damage each. While bathed in holy light, his health bar kept fluctuating up and down. However, he never came close to death.

The group from Bloodlust Blades had more than 30 Priests supporting them from the rear. With the ample healing they provided, the amount of casualties on their side was similarly kept to a bare minimum.

At this moment, a silhouette emerged beside one of the Priests. It was Nie Yan. These Priests had no idea when he snuck his way into the backline!

Nie Yan slashed down with Zennarde's Sword, felling a Priest instantly. He immediately pounced toward another Priest and cut him down too.

Due to his terrifying damage, Nie Yan mowed down the Priests with impunity.

Nie Yan's appearance sparked mass panic in the backline. The Priests scattered like rats, fleeing away in every direction. How could they afford to worry about others when they were getting slaughtered left and right themselves?

At this moment, Sun emerged. He stunned a Priest with Smothering Strike, then finished them off with a Backstab followed by Eviscerate. Even though his damage didn't match Nie Yan's, his attacks were quick and efficient.

One, two, three... Sun was like a phantom, killing players left and right as he popped in and out of the battlefield. Nie Yan was shocked when he looked over at Sun. Sun's movements were already starting to carry the essence of a Shadow Dancer.

It took Nie Yan two lifetimes to comprehend the mysteries of a Shadow Dancer. He had only demonstrated the techniques of a Shadow Dancer once, yet Sun was already beginning to understand them. This genius Thief was slowly blossoming into a dazzling figure.

Elsewhere, One Strike Vow had also killed three Priests. Dressed in skin-tight leather armour, her lithe figure danced across the

battlefield. She was beginning to show traces of what made her a goddess in the previous timeline. She was the dream lover in the minds of countless Thieves, both because of her beauty and astonishing skills. Back then, her popularity among Thieves even eclipsed that of Sun. A simple smile of hers could topple cities, it wouldn't be overboard to call her a femme fatale.

The three of them were like sharp daggers, piercing through the defenses of Bloodlust Blades and wreaking havoc on the Priests in the back.

The situation over on the frontline was just as grim for Bloodlust Blades. No longer receiving heals, their Warriors started dropping like flies.

Tang Yao was especially conspicuous. He was firing out spells like a gatling gun, taking out numerous Warriors in quick succession.

When the frontline collapsed, Smoke Stub, Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and the others charged forward and started slaughtering the Mages.

Bloodlust Blades' force was routed. They could no longer put up the slightest bit of resistance.

Smoke Stub swept through six Mages with a Whirlwind Slash. He raised his sword and charged forward, felling an Arcane Mage. These Mages were ordinary players. Their reactions and awareness were far inferior to that of Smoke Stub and company. Most of them were cut down before they even got the chance to cast a spell.

Smoke Stub, Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and the others left a trail of corpses in their path. Soon, they met up with Nie Yan, Sun, and One Strike Vow in the back.

Under the assault of Nie Yan's group, around 80% of the over 300 players from Bloodlust Blades were slaughtered in a matter of minutes. The remaining 20% had all fled.

Chapter 305 – Crystal Caverns

This was usually the end result when ordinary players faced off against elites, a one-sided slaughter. According to convention, Warriors tanked at the front while the Mages behind them focused their firepower on two or three individuals at a time. Which in turn was offset by the healing from the Priests. These battles tended to drag out for a long time before reaching their conclusion.

This was also the strategy of Bloodlust Blades, keep the battle in a deadlock until reinforcements arrived. The enemy would have nowhere left to run. But who could've predicted Nie Yan's group would topple all expectations. Nie Yan, Sun, and One Strike Vow through their outstanding skill bypassed multiple layers of defenses and ambushed the Priests in the backline. Following which the defensive line at the front crumbled due to the lack of healing, leaving the Mages completely exposed. It was this series of decisive blows that led to the more than 300 players from Bloodlust Blades being soundly defeated in just under six minutes.

The might of Nie Yan's group was clear for all to see.

The surviving players from Bloodlust Blades lost all will to fight and fled for their lives, lest they lost the chance.

Piles of corpses littered the ground. Only Nie Yan's group remained on the battlefield.

"How many did we lose?" Nie Yan asked. It would be wishful thinking to hope they suffered no casualties after such a battle.

"Three. We've recovered their equipment. But if we revive them here, they'll suffer an even heavier experience penalty. Plus, we have even more difficult battles up ahead of us. So I decided it was best to let them respawn in the cemetery," Smoke Stub replied.

Nie Yan nodded in approval. Fortunately, they only lost three members. These losses were within an acceptable range.

“Everyone, get back on your mounts. We’re leaving!” Nie Yan ordered. They couldn’t dally in one place for too long.

If they kept skirmishing with the forces of Bloodlust Blades, with their numbers slowly being shaved away every time, there would eventually be none of them left! Although Nie Yan could go back to Calore with a Return Scroll, the others who were branded with red names didn’t have that luxury. After they risked their lives to save him, how could he just abandon them to save his own skin?

Everyone got back on their horses and continued galloping south. Before long, a dense forest came into view at the edge of the prairie. Nie Yan’s eyes lit up. It would be much easier to get out alive under the cover of the forest. No matter how large of a force Bloodlust Blades brought, it would be difficult to surround them.

Just as Nie Yan was inwardly celebrating, he received a warning from Guo Huai.「Don’t go there! Over 6,000 players from Bloodlust Blades are lurking in ambush. It’s too dangerous without Advanced Magic! Flee to the Crystal Caverns in the east. It’s a Level 50 map. When you’re there, Bloodlust Blades will have no way of catching you no matter how many people they send. All of you can hole yourselves up there, then come out when you’ve cleared your red names. Just be careful. Crystal Caverns is an unexplored map, so there’s bound to be a lot of high-level Elites and Sub Elites.」

Even Nie Yan was flabbergasted by how Guo Huai obtained this information. Ever since the incident that occurred in Sinful Gorge, Guo Huai started doing his utmost to expand Asskickers United’s intelligence network. With the support of the Dragonsoar Financial Group, resources were no issue. Now, all that effort was finally paying off.

It took many capable individuals for Asskickers United to reach this stage!

After receiving Guo Huai’s warning, Nie Yan immediately led the group away from the forest and toward the Crystal Caverns in the

east.

...

Red River Stronghold.

Back in the guild headquarters of Bloodlust Blades, Mad Blade's face turned dark after receiving the news that 300 or so of his players had been wiped out by Nie Yan's group. However, he still had many troops stationed in front of their path, ready to intercept them. At this moment, he received another update. Their target had abruptly changed directions and was moving toward the east!

A thought suddenly crossed Mad Blade's mind. "Shit, they're escaping to the Crystal Caverns! Stop them!" The Crystal Caverns were similar to a labyrinth. His troops had no hope of chasing them down if Nie Yan and the others were allowed to reach that place. His plans of killing them would go up in smoke!

Mad Blade had no way of knowing what would happen inside the Crystal Caverns. A Level 50 map was extremely difficult to explore. However, Nie Yan's group was simply too strong. They might really be capable of pulling it off! If they walked out of this unscathed and with a huge pile of loot to boot, wouldn't that be pouring more salt on the open wounds of Bloodlust Blades?

Crystalline Molemen spawned in the Crystal Caverns. It was rumoured on the forums that a Level 50 Lord and many Elites lurked there. Bloodlust Blades had dispatched an expedition group to explore this map before, but they returned with their heads hung in defeat. A certain region inside the caverns contained seven Level 50 Elite Crystalline Molemen. This was an incredibly difficult obstacle they couldn't overcome.

If even their 60 player expedition team failed, Mad Blade doubted Nie Yan's group could actually succeed. However, he couldn't simply eliminate the possibility from his mind.

Regardless of the method, Mad Blade absolutely didn't wish to

see Nie Yan's group reach the Crystal Caverns!

While riding on horseback, Nie Yan's group spotted a large cave at the base of a mountain in the distance. Scattered outside the entrance were many crystal-covered boulders that glistened brilliantly under the sunlight.

The Crystal Caverns was a primary location for ore production.

When they reached within 30 meters of the Crystal Caverns, Nie Yan suddenly had an uneasy premonition. He quickly activated Eye of Truth and located several groups lurking in the vicinity: 30 players to the left, 50 to the right, while more and more were arriving from behind. Every single one of them was a Thief, and they were all hiding in the shadows. The fate of anyone ambushed by them was obvious.

When Nie Yan first decided to form the Hundred Thieves, he felt the characteristics of the class were most suited for ambushes. Their tactics in a group, which were similar to that of a pack of wolves, achieved great success. He had seen this sort of model successfully pulled off several times in the previous timeline. He never expected that today he would get a taste of his own medicine.

「Everyone, dismount! Rush into the Crystal Caverns!」Nie Yan ordered. After which he and the others jumped down from their horses and unsummoned them.

Painted Muslin and Young Seven both tossed out illuminates in different directions. The piercing radiance poured down from the sky and revealed the silhouettes of every Thief in the vicinity.

Smoke Stub, Bladelight, and the others charged toward the enemy.

Whirlwind Slash!

Sword beams flew out in every direction.

The Thieves quickly divided themselves into smaller groups,

with five or six of them taking on each person. The remainder all swarmed toward the Mages in the back like a surging torrent.

The Thieves were like a pack of hungry wolves, their eyes locked solely onto their prey.

Facing off against a group like this was a huge headache. If any one of these Thieves managed to stun you, your fate was sealed. It was just too easy to get stunned.

Repel!

Repel!

Tang Yao, Summer Bug, and the other Mages did their best to keep the enemy at bay. As they repelled the Thieves, more and more would swarm forward from the back. They cast crowd control spells in quick succession, occasionally killing one or two Thieves. However, it felt like herding cats.

Tang Yao and the others unleashed a flurry of spells, blasting swaths of Thieves away.

“Fuck, is there no end to them? There’s so many!”

Nie Yan’s group pressed forward toward the Crystal Caverns with much difficulty.

Bladelight charged into six Thieves, sending them flying away. However, more Thieves rushed in to fill the gap. A Thief managed to land a Smothering Strike on the back of Bladelight’s head. In that instant, all the Thieves swarmed toward him and unleashed their full burst, causing his health to plummet.

Painted Muslin threw out a Heal and restored Bladelight’s health back to stable levels. Tang Yao cast Repel, forcing the Thieves back.

Only then did Bladelight break free from the crowd control. The others weren’t faring much better. The frontliners engaged the Thieves in close-combat, so it was almost impossible to dodge

every stun. Another two members died.

Nie Yan's group was getting closer and closer to the Crystal Caverns, 10 meters, 5 meters...

The enemy's attacks were getting fiercer. The number of members at low health steadily rose. Young Seven, Painted Muslin, and the other Priests all broke out in the cold sweat. They were struggling to keep up with the healing. If this went on for any longer, the number of casualties would rise dramatically. They would likely collapse before reaching the entrance of the Crystal Caverns.

At this moment, Tang Yao who was under the protection of the surrounding members finally finished chanting a spell.

Obscurus Expulsion!

A powerful burst rammed into the Thieves and swept them away.

They were forced to retreat over 20 meters away, creating a large clearance between the two parties.

Everyone charged into the Crystal Caverns. Smoke Stub, Bladelight, and Lofty Shadow blocked off the entrance and bunkered down with their shields raised.

"Here I thought this Obscurus Magic was useless. Who knew it had such effect," Tang Yao exclaimed in an incredulous tone. This Obscurus Magic's cast time wasn't all that long at roughly 3 seconds, yet its effect was quite powerful. It surprisingly repelled the opponents by over 20 meters. In a battle, this was definitely a useful skill!

The Thieves from Bloodlust Blades were blocked from entering the Crystal Caverns. Nie Yan and the others turned around and looked inside. So far as the eye could see there were rocks of various shapes and sizes protruding from the ground and walls. They were covered in crystals that emitted a faint light within the cave. No one knew where these deep, winding passages led.

Chapter 306 – Marquis

The surroundings were dimly lit by crystal ores. From time to time, Nie Yan and the others saw shadows dance along the cavern walls. They likely belonged to the monsters that lurked inside these caverns, Crystalline Molemen!

Crystalline Molemen dropped rare ores upon death!

Nie Yan's group retreated deeper into the Crystal Caverns while the Thieves from Bloodlust Blades spared no effort in chasing after them. Up ahead was a large open chamber. It would be troublesome if they were allowed inside.

There were Crystalline Molemen to the front while the Thieves from Bloodlust Blades were hounding them from the back. Nie Yan's group was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

"They just won't give up. What do we do?" Smoke Stub and the others looked toward Nie Yan. It would be hard to deal with the Crystalline Molemen up front with the constant threat of being ambushed looming over them.

Nie Yan pondered for a moment. "Let's lure the Crystalline Molemen into blocking up the entranceway."

"That sounds good and all, but we can't guarantee the Crystalline Molemen will do what you want. It'll be troublesome if they end up turning on us instead," Smoke Stub said.

Smoke Stub's worries weren't unfounded. There was no way all the Crystalline Molemen would stay on the Thief that pulled them. They would surely split up and attack the other group members. Add this to the fact that the Thieves from Bloodlust Blades were nipping at their heels, and it would most likely lead to a wipe.

"The crux of the problem is aggro. Do any of you have Blizzard?" Nie Yan asked. His plan would be much simpler with this spell.

"I do," Undying Scoundrel replied. Blizzard was one of the very

first area-of-effect spells an Elementalist learned. How could he not have it?

“Good. Do any of you have a Basic Invisibility Potion?” Nie Yan asked. With this item, he would have everything he needed for his plan. Otherwise, he would have to think of another way.

Basic Invisibility Potions temporarily put the player in a state of invisibility. They would turn into a ball of mist, becoming immune to physical attacks. However, they would take 300% bonus damage from magic attacks and their movement speed would also be greatly reduced. This sort of potion was fairly rare. It would only show up occasionally in the hands of top-class experts.

“I have one,” Bladelight replied. His gaze fell on an azure bottle in his bag.

“I do too. I got it as a reward from a class-related quest,” Lofty Shadow pitched in. Luckily, he also had an Invisibility Potion. He kept it in his bag just in case it might be of some use one day.

“Give your Invisibility Potions to Undying Scoundrel. Scoundrel, follow me. The rest of you stay put,” Nie Yan ordered. Just the two of them sufficed to enact his plan.

Undying Scoundrel received the Invisibility Potions from Bladelight and Lofty Shadow, then followed behind Nie Yan.

Nie Yan and Undying Scoundrel quickly approached the large chamber.

“Stay put for now. I’ll go aggro the mobs...” Nie Yan explained his plans to Undying Scoundrel before darting off.

Nie Yan activated Shadow Waltz and dashed into the large chamber, passing one group of Crystalline Molemen after another.

Crystalline Molemen were covered in dark green crystals. Their heads were oversized while their appendages were wiry. They wielded pikes, and they moved around in groups of 50–60.

Crystalline Moleman: Level 50

Health: 8,000/8,000

From what Nie Yan recalled, these mobs were naturally resistant to physical damage. Physical attacks couldn't do much damage to them, but they were vulnerable to magic. For every strength, there was also a weakness. Because of this, it was easier for Mages to attract their aggro. An Elite or Lord-class Crystalline Moleman abruptly shifting targets mid-battle would spell disaster for any team facing it. This was why no guild had cleared the Crystal Caverns yet.

Nie Yan travelled to the far edge of the chamber. When he saw a group of Crystalline Molemen up ahead, he took aim with the Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow and fired a round of bolts at them.

「Put! Put! Put!」Five bolts struck a Crystalline Moleman, immediately attracting the aggro of the entire group.

Nie Yan quickly turned around and fled back toward the chamber entrance. He attracted the attention of multiple other groups along the way. He was like a railroad engineer, and the train he was leading quickly grew to almost 300 Crystalline Molemen in size.

Seeing the surging tide of Crystalline Molemen, Undying Scoundrel's heart nearly jumped out of his chest.

“Start casting Blizzard!” Nie Yan shouted.

Undying Scoundrel immediately began chanting. An icy mist formed around him as he gathered ice elemental energy, causing the surrounding temperature to plummet.

Before long, a few snowflakes turned into a blinding blizzard that swallowed everything in the immediate vicinity.

When the Crystalline Molemen entered the spell's range, a blanket of damage values rose up into the air. Although they were only taking 10–20 damage with every tick, it was enough for them to shift their aggro onto Undying Scoundrel.

Undying Scoundrel abruptly turned tail and fled into the passageway.

「The Crystalline Molemen are aggroed onto Undying Scoundrel. Don't attack them!」Nie Yan informed through the voice chat. He placed himself in the path of the fastest Crystalline Moleman.

The Crystalline Moleman stopped in its tracks to swing at Nie Yan with its pike, only for him to sidestep and vanish into the shadows. Just as it was about to resume its chase, he reappeared in front of it again.

Nie Yan kept intercepting the Crystalline Molemen at the front of the group. Like this, their overall speed was greatly reduced.

The horde of Crystalline Molemen were slowly led to the entrance of the Crystal Caverns.

The Thieves from Bloodlust Blades were still lingering around. When they saw the mob of Crystalline Molemen coming towards them, their eyes widened like dinner plates.

“Holy shit! So many Crystalline Molemen!”

Smoke Stub, Bladelight, and the others hurriedly stepped aside. These Crystalline Molemen ran past them without batting an eye. All of their aggro was concentrated on Undying Scoundrel.

Crystalline Molemen flooded into the entranceway of the Crystal Caverns. Several of them pounced onto Undying Scoundrel who quickly downed a Basic Invisibility Potion. He transformed into an incorporeal form and immediately lost all aggro.

Undying Scoundrel ran back to the others. Although he was sprinting with all his might, he was moving at roughly walking speed. It appeared as if he was running in slow motion.

After a while, the effects of the first Basic Invisibility Potion wore off. He quickly drank the second one. Luckily, the cooldown for this item was short.

By relying on these two Basic Invisibility Potions, Undying Scoundrel finally regrouped with Nie Yan and the others.

Looking back at the entrance, it was filled to the brim with Crystalline Molemen. Without clearing them away, it would be impossible for Bloodlust Blades' forces to enter the Crystal Caverns! By that time, Nie Yan and the others would've long reached the deepest regions of the map, and all the monsters along the way would've already respawned.

Nie Yan could only imagine the faces of the higher-ups of Bloodlust Blades when they received this news. Despite stirring up so much trouble in their territory, he still got away without so much as a scratch, and there was nothing they could do about it. Bloodlust Mad Blade was definitely going to blow his lid!

Nie Yan's lips curved into a satisfied smile. "Alright, the entrance is plugged. Let's go and clear our red names." Like this, there was nothing more to worry about.

Smoke Stub and the others couldn't help but admire Nie Yan for his quick thinking. If it wasn't for his idea, they would've been stuck at the entrance of the Crystal Caverns without any way to advance or retreat.

Nie Yan and the others started heading further into the Crystal Caverns. They definitely had to completely explore this map before Bloodlust Blades cleared out those 300 Crystalline Molemen at the entrance.

Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan engaged the monsters ahead. With three powerful Fighters tanking at the front, the Mages at the back could cast spells without worry. They left a trail of corpses behind them as they traveled through the twisting and winding tunnels.

At some point, Nie Yan received a message from Sleepy Fox. 「Check the Union of Assassins. You'll be in for a big surprise!」

Did something happen in the Union of Assassins? Nie Yan checked the organization's page to look for Sleepy Fox's so-called surprise. A Marquis and three Earls had emerged in the list of professional players. This was unbelievable! In order to reach the rank of Marquis, it required a member to complete three missions with commission fees of 1,000 gold or higher. When he went to check the identity of this Marquis, he was given an even bigger shock to see a familiar name, Shadow Killer!

He had just completed these three missions recently.

Mission: Assassinate the guild leader of Holy Empire, Sleepy Fox.

Commission Fee: 1,200 gold

Status: Completed

Mission: Assassinate the guild leader of Alliance of Mages, Ardent Blaze.

Commission Fee: 2,200 gold

Status: Completed

Mission: Assassinate the guild leader of Sapphire Shrine, Fa Lan.

Commission Fee: 1,800 gold

Status: Completed

Mission: Assassinate the guild leader of Asskickers United, Nirvana Flame.

Commission Fee: 3,900 gold

Status: Incomplete

Damn! Shadow Killer actually joined the Union of Assassins! Nie Yan was greatly taken aback. Not only that, but there was a bounty for his head on the mission boards as well! This was definitely something he had never accounted for!

However, he had insisted from the start that the Union of Assassins wouldn't discriminate against any client no matter the

content of their request. He never expected this would come back to bite them in the ass so quickly.

Shadow Killer was really worthy of admiration. Besides Sleepy Fox, Ardent Blaze, and Fa Lan, he had assassinated countless others. Regardless of the target's affiliation, so long as he was given the money, he would assassinate them without question. Of course, only experts were qualified for him to personally take action! Nevertheless, his first attempt on Nie Yan's life had failed.

Chapter 307 – Super Alliance

So long as Nie Yan stayed vigilant, Shadow Killer couldn't do anything to him. He had taken great strides along the path of a Shadow Dancer, significantly improving both his awareness and technique. Add to this his outstanding equipment such as the Glimpse of Darkness and Zennarde's Sword, and he wouldn't lose out to anyone!

Nie Yan was undeterred by Shadow Killer's provocation.

Nie Yan chuckled lightly at the staggering bounty of 3,900 gold on his head. He never expected to be held in such high regard. It was more than double that of Sleepy Fox for example. This was testament to his position in the hearts of the players. And with Shadow Killer's recent failure, this bounty was set to increase.

Nie Yan noticed that the current membership of the Union of Assassin had finally broken through to 20,000. Almost every notable player in the professional gaming circle had joined, including even those from other cities. Such a gathering attracted clientele from all walks of life, who issued requests with rewards ranging from just a few gold to upwards of tens of thousands. This incited the members to furiously raise their own rank within the organization.

The Union of Assassins currently had 1 Marquis, 3 Earls, 1,200 Viscounts, and 7,000 barons. All these players generated a mountain of gold for the Princes every day.

The Union of Assassins' profit would only rise as it gained more recognition among the players. Yesterday's total revenue was more than 5,000 gold. Today it broke through to over 10,000 gold. An enormous money-making machine had taken form, and it was currently displaying its might!

10,000 gold every day was a lot, even when divided among the shareholders.

Some players with backing tried to establish organizations to rival the Union of Assassins. But the vast majority of them ended up failing. Some even attempted to embezzle the commission fees from their players, raising even more doubt over these upstarts. The professional players soon came to a consensus. Outside of the Union of Assassins, the vast majority couldn't be trusted. The Union of Assassins controlled an overwhelming 98% of the market. In this sort of environment, it was almost impossible for another organization to emerge. Even if one did manage to pop out of the woodwork, under the suppression of Sleepy Fox and Fa Lan, they would have no chance to grow.

Naturally, the Union of Assassin's development wasn't without its bumps. Some people accused the organization of stealing money from commissions, trying to cast doubt over them. However, Sleepy Fox came out with the records of every transaction, which had all been noted down by the system. All those who were trying to stir the pot immediately shut up.

The Union of Assassins had experienced numerous incidents. For it to have grown to this stage wasn't easy.

Nie Yan looked over the list of top-ranking members in the Union of Assassins. Some of them were familiar names. In the previous timeline, they were all famous professional players. He sent each of them an invitation to join Asskickers United, promising them a host of benefits. It would be a win even if just one or two of them accepted.

In fact, many of these players were elated after receiving Nie Yan's invitation. A lot of them had yet to make a name for themselves. Although some had a tiny bit of fame, it was nothing compared to his prestige. He had personally sent them an invitation! This action held significant meaning. It meant they had gained his recognition!

As for how many of them would join Asskickers United, Nie Yan could only wait and see.

Nie Yan glanced at the mission boards. There were over 60,000 missions available. Professional players could sort through the categories and pick whichever one interested them. When the Union of Assassins first started up, there were maybe a dozen or so missions every day. It was a stark difference.

Nie Yan issued several requests on the mission boards.

Mission: Assassinate the guild leader of Bloodlust Blades, Bloodlust Mad Blade.

Reward: 2,300 gold

Mission: Assassinate the guild leader of Victorious Return, Heaven Breaker.

Reward: 1,200 gold

Mission: Assassinate the guild leader of Radiant Sacred Flame, Nightbreak Trickster.

Reward: 2,100 gold

Their bounties naturally wouldn't be higher than his own. Otherwise, wouldn't that be admitting they were above him in status?

Nie Yan dealt with a few administrative tasks, then closed out of the Union of Assassins chat server. He didn't know if anyone would take up his requests. He would check back and see later on.

At this moment, Nie Yan received an explosive piece of news from Sleepy Fox. He was currently in a secret meeting with Nightbreak Trickster, who expressed interest in joining the alliance with Asskickers United. The relationship between Radiant Sacred Flame and Victorious Return was never that great in the first place.

Nightbreak Trickster didn't wish to become a puppet of Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors. But circumstances forced him to their side. He was more than willing

to make peace with Asskickers United, especially if it meant that the strongholds Radiant Sacred Flame controlled in Calore would no longer be under threat. However, as a guild leader, he naturally had his own considerations. He first needed Asskickers United to make a few promises.

Nie Yan snapped out of his daze midway through listening to Sleepy Fox's narration. He realized his previous way of thinking was flawed! In his past life, Radiant Sacred Flame and Victorious Return only became Cao Xu's lackeys after being acquired by the Century Financial Group. He subconsciously classified them as mortal enemies. But in this life, Century Financial Group was forced to abandon their plans in Calore due to the emergence of Asskickers United. Heaven Breaker and Cao Xu were business partners in reality, so it would be hard to shake up their relationship. But what sort of relationship did Nightbreak Trickster have with Cao Xu?

The answer was simple, absolutely none! None of their interests were tied together, nor did they share any sort of friendship!

If Radiant Sacred Flame jumped ship, Victorious Return would be left to suffer all alone in Calore. They would no longer have any hope of making a comeback. It was entirely possible they would even disband. From then on, Calore would only consist of Asskickers United and its allies. Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors' plans of using Radiant Sacred Flame and Victorious Return as chess pieces to deal with Asskickers United would be ruined!

「Don't spare any effort to try and win Radiant Sacred Flame over. Show them our sincerity. Let them put forward their conditions. As long as they're reasonable, agree to all of them. We have to get Radiant Sacred Flame on our side!」Nie Yan replied to Sleepy Fox.

Radiant Sacred Flame definitely had a price. They wouldn't easily betray their allies. Since it was like this, all Nie Yan had to do was

agree to their conditions. Their defection would have far-reaching effects on the power balance of the Viridian Empire!

「Sleepy Fox, invite Fa Lan to this call. I have something important to talk about,」Nie Yan said to Sleepy Fox. He had come to a few realizations.

At present, Asskickers United was far and away the top guild in Calore. Both Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine heavily relied on them. Not just their top brasses, but also the average player in their guilds had become blind followers. Asskickers United had already firmly established its position. Sleepy Fox and Fa Lan understood it would be impossible to have a falling out with them. However, if things continued on like this, Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine would inevitably be swallowed up. To counter this outcome, they would exclude Asskickers United too at times to ensure some semblance of independence. The relationship of the two sides was extremely complicated.

Before receiving the support of the Dragonsoar Financial Group, Asskickers United's position was already secure. Their growth after receiving the support of the Dragonsoar Financial Group made others even more envious.

Nie Yan understood this logic.

「Alright,」Sleepy Fox replied. He invited Fa Lan to join the voice call.

「I want to talk about our alliance. Previously, the Dragonsoar Financial Group purchased shares in Asskickers United. I'm sure you all already know of this by now. For a guild, receiving a backer will aid in their growth. The supervisor from the Dragonsoar Financial Group recently told me they wish to invest in your guilds, and have me act on their behalf. What do the two of you think? Would you be interested?」Nie Yan asked. He planned to borrow the name of the Dragonsoar Financial Group to acquire Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine. It was stealing a rafter

and replacing it with a column. Like this, he could fully control Sapphire Shrine and Holy Empire.

As for why he was borrowing the Dragonsoar Financial Group's name, it was to prevent a negative reaction from Sleepy Fox and Fa Lan. After all, both sides had their own personal disagreements.

He currently made more than 7,000 gold a day from the auction houses, Starry Night Potion Shop, Union of Assassins, business estates, and other sources of income. He had almost 60,000 gold saved up in his private account. There was also an additional 40,000 gold he could withdraw from the guild at any time. Add to this his daily income, and he had more than enough to buyout Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine.

Sleepy Fox and Fa Lan pondered for a moment.

「What are their requests?」Fa Lan asked. In reality, it was really difficult to get by as a guild without the support of a financial group. For example, Sapphire Shrine only made roughly 2,000 gold a day. The guild's daily upkeep was high, not to mention having to constantly spend gold on strengthening their strongholds and providing guild members with mounts. In comparison to Asskickers United who had received the investment of the Dragonsoar Financial Group, the gap between them was growing larger and larger. It would be impossible for him not to feel a little anxious.

「The Dragonsoar Financial Group wants a 35% stake in your guild under the name of their supervisor, and another 25% in my name. You guys will still be the leaders of your respective guilds. They won't interfere with your decisions either,」Nie Yan said with a straight face. Sleepy Fox and Fa Lan would definitely suspect him of having his own motives. After all, asking for 60% right off the bat was quite ruthless. However, this was a financial group acquiring a guild. Of course it would at least be 60%, just like with how Century Financial Group acquired the five major guilds in the previous timeline. The Dragonsoar Financial Group only requiring

30% shares in Asskickers United was a special case.

Fa Lan's eyes flashed.「The 35% stake, will it really be controlled by the Dragonsoar Financial Group?」

Chapter 308 – Super Trade Channel

「Of course. Or do you really think I'm that rich?」Nie Yan chuckled. No merchant could become successful without a bit of cunning. Both Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine would inevitably fall under his control. Borrowing the name of the Dragonsoar Financial Group simply made the pill easier for them to swallow. Truthfully, it didn't matter whether the investment came from Asskickers United or the Dragonsoar Financial Group. A guild without a powerful backer could only last so long. With Sleepy Fox and Fa Lan's financial abilities, it was only a matter of time before their members would move on to greener pastures. Just having a powerful ally wasn't enough to keep a guild afloat.

Many financial groups recognized the current climate in Calore. Asskickers United held tremendous sway over the decision making of both Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine. Even if you did invest in these two guilds, their fates were subject to the whims of an outside party. There would be no way to safeguard your interests. Given the situation, who would be willing to throw in their money just to watch it float away?

Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine were stuck in an awkward predicament.

Fa Lan couldn't help but feel dejected after thinking to this point. But what other choice did he have? It wasn't like he was swimming in a sea of options. So what if Asskickers United acquired Sapphire Shrine? All it would do was solidify their alliance!

Sleepy Fox also clearly understood his current position. As a professional player, his prime focus lay in securing the best deal. By allowing Asskickers United to invest in Holy Empire, it would remove the final barriers between them. And with him still owning 40% of the guild, he would continue to receive benefits well into the future.

Asskickers United would surely also have to depend on Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine at times. When the several of them joined forces, they didn't lose out in the slightest to Bloodlust Blades, Divine Protectors, and Alliance of Mages.

「What's their offer?」Fa Lan asked. Sapphire Shrine and Holy Empire currently had four strongholds between them. This was their leverage!

Finances were tight for both Sapphire Shrine and Holy Empire. Developing their strongholds required tens of thousands of gold. Currently, the vast majority of their income came from the contributions of guild members. This amounted to roughly 2,000 gold a day, which wasn't anywhere near enough to meet their demands. They would only have a reliable source of income after their strongholds were developed. This is what led to the current situation where they were struggling to make ends meet. If they ran out of capital mid-way through, what awaited them was bankruptcy. They attempted to find funding through the Credit Exchange before, but practically all of the gold on the market had been snatched up by the large financial groups. There was nothing left for them!

Nie Yan was also aware of their situation. He carefully thought things over, only to find that he had been too kind in how he dealt with these matters. When Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine allied with Asskickers United, he didn't interfere with their plans out of principle. But in reality, he should've put them firmly under his grasp from the start. This would've been beneficial for both sides.

Sapphire Shrine and Holy Empire brought in several thousand gold a day at most. All they could do was tighten their belts and hope their days of hardship would quickly come to pass. They weren't like Nie Yan, who had mountains of gold flowing in from his various properties like the Starry Night Potion Shop, along with other sources of income.

「We'll invest 150,000 gold into your guilds over two months

spread out across 20 installments, with the first installment being 30,000 gold for each guild. It will be delivered immediately after signing the contract. Naturally, all expenditures will be recorded. We'll appoint a supervisor to both your guilds to handle all administrative affairs related to Asskickers United and the Dragonsoar Financial Group. We'll also subsidize the costs of your contracted members, up to 5,000 credits per person with a quota of 500 players for each guild. Control over the development of the real-world business districts in your strongholds will be handed over to Asskickers United. Finally, we'll continue to support you financially after the initial investment by paying out a bonus of 100,000 gold for every additional stronghold you capture,」Nie Yan replied. 150,000 gold was a monumental sum to both Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine. It was like a bright light at the end of a dark tunnel.

Both Sleepy Fox and Fa Lan were pleasantly surprised by Nie Yan's generous terms, especially the subsidy for their contracted players. This was timely assistance for Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine. Like this, they could secure the loyalty and devotion of their elites.

The vast majority of players joined Conviction with the aspiration of making a living out of it. If Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine were slow on providing them with benefits, and there were no other gains for being in the guild, players would seek their fortune elsewhere. This held true not just in the game but also in reality. With a monthly salary of 5,000 credits, who in their right mind would leave?

Nie Yan wouldn't lose out either. The Dragonsoar Financial Group highly valued every real-world business district. For each one he acquired, they would pay him a tremendous sum. He would make a killing selling four real-world business districts to them.

Each group got what they wanted out of this deal. Nie Yan obtained control over Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine. The

Dragonsoar Financial Group obtained four real-world business districts. Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine obtained the investments they so desperately needed, and their players received a significant boost in salary. And last but not least, Fa Lan and Sleepy Fox's shares would rise in value, which meant they would net a larger profit. Everyone was happy.

Nie Yan had settled the matter of face. On the surface, it looked like Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine simply received the investment of the Dragonsoar Financial Group instead of being swallowed up by Asskickers United.

Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine would have an incredibly difficult time developing without an investor. On top of this, their real world business districts would be rotting away without buyers. Wanting to support a guild's expenditures with just the daily taxes from their strongholds was wishful thinking.

「I agree to these terms, but I want to add in another clause. Sapphire Shrine will remain independent. It won't be forced to merge with Asskickers United,」Fa Lan said. Even though he sold 60% of the guild's shares to ensure its prosperity, he wasn't quite willing to see the name disappear.

「No problem. But if war breaks out, I hope Sapphire Shrine will have Asskickers United's back.」

「Naturally, so long as it doesn't harm our interests,」Fa Lan agreed.

「Then I guess we're more or less done. All that's left to do is iron out the finer details. Sleepy Fox, what are your thoughts?」Nie Yan asked. The business world was cutthroat. Everyone only looked out for their own interests as they tried to navigate this complex landscape. Things that weighed you down like friendship had no place here.

「I'm fine either way. I'm an organization owner, after all. I only established Holy Empire to secure the livelihoods of the people

under me. It doesn't matter who we receive an investment from. As long as my brothers can comfortably put food on their tables, I'm satisfied,」Sleepy Fox replied. He was quite open minded about the offer. In fact, Nie Yan mentioning the subsidy for his contracted players was what sealed the deal. He didn't care where the money came from, only that his brothers could put food on the table.

「Well, I suppose that settles it. I'll have Watchful Snail draft up the contracts, then send it over for you guys to look at. I hope we can continue to get along for a long time to come,」Nie Yan said. He began his preparations for the signing of the contracts, relaying everything back to the guild headquarters.

When Sleepy Fox and Fa Lan signed the contract, Sapphire Shrine and Holy Empire would truly be bound to Asskickers United. Their alliance was previously shaky at best, with very few interlinked interests. But now, these three guilds were inseparable allies, becoming an unprecedented powerhouse. Even conquering the entire Viridian Empire wouldn't be out of the realm of possibilities.

Nie Yan chatted a bit more with Fa Lan and Sleepy Fox about the particulars of the buyout, then hung up. This time, he had come out with a considerable harvest.

...

Nie Yan and his group continued to travel deeper into the Crystal Caverns. For the time being, they didn't require him to personally take action. These members easily dispatched the monsters they came across.

Nie Yan withdrew to the back of the group, his attention on another matter of importance. He was starting a new chat server, different from the Union of Assassins but similarly an amazing money-maker. Its foundation was based in auction houses, a Super Trade Channel!

He first made a directory with various filters which included: chest armour, gloves, shoulder guards, weapons, crafting materials, and so on. Numerous pages were created, each filled with various items that showed a detailed description and a price. It aggregated all the data from the three auction houses he owned in Calore. Anything listed there would show up in this channel, and anything sold would automatically disappear.

The system's amazing computing ability was seemingly limitless!

Nie Yan planned to open this chat server to the public. Players could freely enter and browse through a wide selection of items. If something caught their eye, they could simply hit purchase and however much it cost would be deducted from their account. After which the staff in the auction house would mail the item to the buyer's personal storage to complete the transaction.

The chat server allowed players to shop while out levelling in the wilderness. Anything they purchased would be waiting for them in their personal storage when they returned to the city. This was extremely convenient. With the help of this trade channel, Nie Yan could exponentially increase the amount of sales in his auction houses. At the same time, he also got to collect an additional service charge.

The Super Trade Channel would never gain the same market dominance as the Union of Assassins. But with the support of the three largest auction houses in Calore, he believed no other auction house could match his catalogue. As the channel gained recognition among the player base, it would increase the number of transactions made by his auction houses, which in turn would encourage more players to list their items up for sale in them, forming a virtuous cycle. From then on, the gold would keep pouring in from all sides!

Chapter 309 – Great Thief

Setting up the Super Trade Channel was actually pretty easy. Aggregating all the data from the auction houses was no problem. The other steps were just as simple. Nie Yan hid his name to maintain anonymity, while at the top of the announcement board he wrote a simple welcome message: For convenient trading between players. In addition, he specified the origin of goods—all came from the three auction houses in Calore. That way, the channel also served as a form of advertisement. Of course, goods from the Starry Night Potion Shop would be sold here too.

「What's this?」Guo Huai asked in a daze after Nie Yan invited him to the channel.

「A channel for trading,」Nie Yan replied, then explained his plans for the Super Trade Channel.

Guo Huai's eyes lit up. Nie Yan's idea for a Super Trade Channel was most certainly doable, its potential endless. It was similar to online shopping in the sense that players could browse for goods to purchase without ever needing to return to the city. This would have a significant effect on the entire game. Advertising the trading channel wasn't anything difficult either, a few server announcements would suffice.

「Hire some staff to make the deliveries, and also get a supervisor,」Nie Yan instructed. Since he lacked the time to manage the Super Trade Channel himself, he could only delegate the job.

「Got it, I'll put Zhao Li in charge. I'll assign him and his staff to help you manage the Super Trade Channel,」Guo Huai said. Both he and Hao Cheng were supervising an overwhelming amount of other work, leaving only Zhao Li available.

「Then it's decided. Zhao Li will be responsible for this,」Nie Yan nodded.

「This is a great idea! If this channel starts gaining traction early on, it'll have enormous potential!」Zhao Li exclaimed.「Should we also contact the owners of other auction houses and pull them into this channel? We could even ask for an entrance fee and a fixed commission for each successful sale.」

「Sharp thinking! Keep working on it and get back to me in a bit.」Nie Yan smiled. Zhao Li has a rather bright mind.

「What's the channel called?」Zhao Li asked.

「The Super Trade Channel. It's easy to remember and rolls nicely off the tongue.」

「That works,」Zhao Li nodded.

By the time Nie Yan left the call, Zhao Li had started on perfecting the trading system in the channel. On the other end, Guo Huai had also begun working on the logistics of the delivery staff, such as their wages.

Back in the Crystal Caverns, Nie Yan followed behind the group as they cleared the mobs up ahead. After an hour or so, they suddenly received several server announcements—advertisements from Guo Huai which provided a basic introduction to the Super Trade Channel. They included basic information such as its purpose, the convenience of purchasing items anytime and anywhere, and so on.

The Super Trade Channel immediately attracted a tidal wave of attention once the announcements were out. Before long, Nie Yan's traffic charts exploded as players flooded into the channel. To their astonishment, they discovered that the Super Trade Channel was actually connected to the three biggest auction houses in Calore! Goods were well stocked, and the prices were nearly identical to the auction houses'!

Players started testing out the system, purchasing some items they needed. After just several minutes, they received a system

announcement informing them that the item they purchased had been deposited into their personal storage.

The first transaction was completed successfully. The second transaction was completed successfully. The third transaction... In a mad frenzy, the players in the Super Trade Channel began purchasing everything they wanted. Traffic in the channel soared in a flash from thousands to tens of thousands, the number of sales increasing accordingly.

The hysteria in the Super Trade Channel rid Nie Yan of the last bits of doubt in his mind. His experiment was successful: the profitability of the Super Trade Channel vastly outperformed the Union of Assassins. Then again, the Union of Assassins only involved a small subsection of the playerbase, while the Super Trade Channel was relevant to every player. Online shopping was something everyone enjoyed, so they naturally flocked to the Super Trade Channel to purchase a large variety of goods. This much was apparent from the soaring traffic numbers.

Once players became completely accustomed to navigating, browsing, and purchasing items, the number of sales per day would grow beyond imagination. Even charging a miniscule commission for each transaction would accumulate to a vast sum.

With this new stream of income, Nie Yan could attract players from all over and bring more and more experts into Asskickers United. Most guilds warred for resources. But with a booming treasury, who could compete with him?

Although other auction houses might also start their own variation of a trade channel, the Super Trade Channel would always remain at the forefront since it was the first to appear.

With it fully operational, funding the salaries of the delivery staff would pose no problem.

The Super Trade Channel had processed several hundred items in a matter of minutes, and the transaction volume just continued

rising exponentially. It was truly an astonishing speed.

Even Nie Yan hadn't expected results to bloom so quickly. It seemed that the system announcement had quite the effect. But then again, after investing 2,000 gold, it was only natural there would be some sort of result. They could continue investing more into advertisements to spread the word when the Super Trade Channel became even more profitable, allowing it to become the go-to place for all shopping players.

Nie Yan instructed Zhao Li to make sure no issues occurred in the delivery process, and also ran over each segment of the system in detail with him.

The Super Trade Channel would become one of his largest sources of income, so of course he had to be careful with it.

After settling everything, Nie Yan closed out of the voice chat. Smoke Stub, Bladelight, and the others turned their gazes toward him.

"Are you behind this Super Trade Channel?" Smoke Stub asked. They had been killing mobs for just a short while, yet Nie Yan had already started another huge commotion. This was quite impressive.

"Yep," Nie Yan replied with a light smile. "How is it? Any trouble so far?"

The Super Trade Channel was a revolutionary idea that would change the way the game was played. It gave way to an entirely new way of trading.

"Not bad," Smoke Stub answered. "I picked up a few consumables just now. It's pretty convenient. I received them just a few minutes after purchasing them." The Super Trade Channel was welcomed by Smoke Stub with open arms, and one could imagine that other players felt the same. In fact, it would be strange if this were not the case.

In less than 10 minutes, Nie Yan's income had reached an astounding 20,000 gold, all of which was pure profit! He was looking forward to seeing how much the Super Trade Channel would grow in the future.

A while later, Guo Huai finished drafting up the contracts for the buyout of Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine. Nie Yan, Sleepy Fox, and Fa Lan verified the terms before signing it. After which Nie Yan ordered Guo Huai and Bird to deposit the first 30,000 gold installment into their guild treasuries.

From now on, Nie Yan would be the largest shareholder in Sapphire Shrine and Holy Empire. The future development of this alliance was just around the corner.

Sleepy Fox and Fa Lan went back to their guild headquarters to announce the news to their members. A guild obtaining an investor was something worthy of celebration. It signified the start of a period of rapid growth!

Nie Yan and the others pressed forwards into the Crystal Caverns. There were seven Level 50 Elite Crystalline Molemen in an opening up ahead. It would already be an impressive feat if they could deal with two or three of these elites at once, to say nothing of all of them.

This was the exact point where the expedition team of Bloodlust Blades wiped.

These Elite Crystalline Molemen completely blocked off their path.

"What should we do?" Everyone was brainstorming for ways of dealing with the group of monsters barring their way.

Nie Yan recalled the information gathered on the forums regarding Crystalline Molemen, then said, "I'll lure five of them away. You guys take care of the other two."

"Big Bro, let me join in," Sun said.

“Do you want us to help too?” One Strike Vow chimed in.

“No need. More people will just complicate things. Who here has Shadow Arrow?” Nie Yan looked over the group. Shadow Arrow was a rather special skill that didn’t generate much aggro.

“I do,” Natural Fiend said.

“Good, that makes things a lot easier. I’ll go lure the mobs. When I have their attention, use Shadow Arrow to split the aggro,” Nie Yan said and set up the entire mobbing process.

Crystalline Molemen moved rather slowly. So long as he wasn’t cornered, there would be no problem. But to do this in the confines of the Crystal Caverns posed a bit of a challenge.

Bladelight and the rest of the group finished up preparations, while Nie Yan entered stealth and used Transcendent Insight to investigate the Crystalline Molemen

Crystalline Moleman (Elite): Level 50

Health 120,000/120,000

These Crystalline Molemen were roughly three meters tall, not much larger than the typical Elite. Covering their bodies were crystalline lumps that protruded out like stakes. In combination with the two-meter long thick pikes they wielded, these Molemen appeared quite fearsome.

It was a mystery what items would drop from killing a Level 50 Elite.

At Level 50, players could attempt a Class Advancement Quest. Their stats would rise exponentially if they successfully completed the quest. To accommodate for this sudden increase of the average player’s strength, the mobs also received a buff at Level 50. This led to Level 50 becoming somewhat of a special number in the minds of the players.

Nie Yan glanced at his current level, 31. After dealing with these

Elites, he would still have to keep on working on his level. After reaching Level 50, he could undertake the Class Advancement Quest for a Great Thief; the reward for completing this quest was something he already looked forward to.

Typically, one or two in every one hundred Level 50 Thieves that attempted the Great Thief's Class Advancement Quest would succeed. In the previous timeline, Nie Yan had only done so when he was nearly Level 70.

Chapter 310 – Molelord

Nie Yan had failed the Great Thief class advancement quest numerous times in the previous timeline, so much so that he memorized it by heart. He was confident in passing it at Level 50 this time around, especially with his recent breakthroughs on the path of a Shadow Dancer.

A class advanced player was worlds apart from ordinary players with great changes in both stats and skills, and could kill them with ease. This sort of suppressing effect was clear as day. The moment players reached Level 50, the battlefields would belong to class advanced players. It would take as many as eight ordinary players to deal with a single equal-levelled class-advanced player.

Nie Yan organized the information related to class advancement in his mind. When the elites of the guild were ready to class advance, he would pass it onto them. This way, he could greatly increase their chances of succeeding.

The future was ruled by players who class advanced. So long as they successfully broke through this hurdle, they would be taking their first steps towards becoming genuine elites.

Nie Yan originally intended to retrieve the next fragment of Sulgata's Shadow after snatching away Faded's chapters from the Book of Order. But he never expected for such a large mishap to occur. It appeared he would have to put this off for another time, most likely some time after reaching Level 50.

Asskickers United currently wasn't powerful enough. It was too dangerous for them to enter the territory of Bloodlust Blades.

Glory City was Bloodlust Blade's base of operations. How could they allow players from other guilds to act unbridled in their territory?

Nie Yan also felt conflicted. He knew there was only so much he

could accomplish alone, but a large force would make a prime target for Bloodlust Blades to surround. Even a mighty dragon couldn't repress a snake in its burrow.

The transport fees between cities was too expensive at 1 gold per player. Otherwise, Nie Yan wouldn't mind bringing Asskickers United's forces to duke it out with them.

Their losses this time around couldn't be considered too bad. They had only lost 5 members despite being chased down a rabbit's hole. Even then, they had more than made up for it by slaughtering hundreds of enemies! Although nearly all the group members were prevented from returning to Calore due to their red names, they were relatively safe hiding in the Crystal Caverns.

Naturally, this didn't mean they could lower their vigilance. In order to avoid Bloodlust Blades from catching up to them, they had to keep travelling deeper into the Crystal Caverns. Only like this could they ensure their safety.

For the next couple of days, they would be confined to these caverns as they were clearing their red names. Only afterwards could they return to Calore.

Nie Yan approached the Crystalline Moleguards and took aim with his Cavalry Crossbow.「Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!」Five bolts flew out and struck one of them.

The seven Crystalline Moleguards were immediately alerted of Nie Yan's presence and charged toward him.

「Fiend, use Shadow Arrow!」Nie Yan ordered through voice chat.

Nie Yan had barely finished speaking when a black bolt shot out from Natural Fiend's hand, smashing into a Crystalline Moleguard with a soft pop. Its aggro shifted to Natural Fiend, and it charged toward him. As planned, the other monsters' aggro remained on Nie Yan so they continued their chase.

Now that a Crystalline Moleguard had split from the group,

Bladelight charged forward to intercept it with a Shield Bash. The monster thrust its pike at him, dealing over 800 damage with a single crushing blow. Even though Bladelight had close to 2,000 health, such high damage was still extremely dangerous to him.

Cold Peak and Lofty Shadow also jumped into the fray. The three Fighters firmly blocked the Crystalline Moleguard from advancing.

Seismic Slam!

The Crystalline Moleguard sent Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan staggering several meters back while also stunning them. Young Seven and Painted Muslin quickly cast Heal, restoring their health bars back to full.

After breaking free from the encirclement, the Crystalline Moleguard charged toward the players in the backline.

The Crystalline Moleguard was a tough nut to crack. It barely took any damage from the Warriors, only around 50 damage. Its aggro shifted to the Priests who were healing.

Taunt!

Smoke Stub forced the Crystalline Moleguard to target him. He rammed into its large frame with a Charge, causing it to stagger several steps back. At this moment, Bladelight and the others regained control of their bodies and immediately moved to surround it again.

The Crystalline Moleguard stabbed out with its pike and struck Smoke Stub for over 1,000 damage.

After losing almost two-thirds of his health, Smoke Stub quickly fled for safety.

Just as the Crystalline Moleguard waved its pike and was about to give chase, Bladelight intercepted it and roared.

Demoralizing Shout!

Taunt!

Bladelight activated the skills back to back, causing the Crystalline Moleguard's aggro to shift back onto him.

"Everyone, keep it locked down! Mages, fire away!" Bladelight shouted as he unleashed a flurry of attacks on the Crystalline Moleguard.

The Crystalline Moleguard repeatedly struck Bladelight, causing his health bar to plummet. However, Young Seven and Painted Muslin provided timely healing, bringing him back from the brink of death as a gentle radiance washed over him.

"If an Elite Crystalline Moleguard already hits so hard, what do we do if we meet a Lord?" Smoke Stub asked. The attacks of these Crystalline Moleguards were simply too fierce!

"I have a Rank 8 Shield. I don't know if it'll be of any use," Bladelight said. If he activated the Shield, his survivability would increase several fold, to the extent he could possibly tank a Crystalline Molelord.

However, none of them were completely confident.

Tang Yao and the others bombarded the Crystalline Moleguard with spells. It furiously flailed and thrashed about, but its health rapidly fell.

Nie Yan was also constantly on the brink of death. The six Crystalline Moleguards were hot on his trail, and in such a narrow space it was difficult to keep dodging.

The Crystalline Moleguards surrounded Nie Yan, and it appeared he would be killed at any moment. Sun and the others broke out in a cold sweat. But at this moment, he shot out a webline from his Silk Spinner Ring at a nearby wall and swung away to safety.

As Nie Yan flew over the heads of the Crystalline Moleguards, Natural Fiend struck one of them with a Shadow Arrow, causing its aggro to shift onto him.

Sun and One Strike Vow also seized this opportunity to lure away

two Crystalline Moleguards, greatly lessening the burden on Nie Yan. With his Shadow Dance footwork, he could easily avoid the remaining three Crystalline Moleguards. His only worry was accidentally colliding with Sun or One Strike Vow. This area was simply too small.

A minute later, the first Crystalline Moleguard finally fell. Natural Fiend immediately used Shadow Arrow to lure another one over to Bladelight and the others, who proceeded to attack without pause. They were all players with exceptional awareness, so their cooperation was extremely smooth with few mistakes. Even when someone did, the others could make up for it.

From their teamwork and synergy, you could easily tell the difference between an ordinary and elite team. Ordinary teams would often wipe with the slightest mistake, while elite teams could quickly adapt to the situation. This didn't mean elite teams never wiped, just that the chances of it happening were far lower.

“Did the Crystalline Moleguard drop anything good?” Smoke Stub asked Bladelight.

“No.” Bladelight shook his head. “A Level 50 Gold-grade Shadow Priest Robe, two gems, and... I think a quest item?” He shared the item's information in chat.

Crystalline Molelord Bennet's Journal Page (Quest Item): 1/5

This journal page was extremely tattered. The writing on it was from the Ancient Common Language.

The beautiful Empress Finas kissed my forehead on this cold, lonely night. I feel as though I could melt under the warmth of her gentle lips... The cold from the blizzard split open the rock of the Crystal Caverns on the night... Empress Finas draped her warm leather robe over me, something she personally knitted... (Too damaged to continue.)

It was an extract from a tale told on a wintry night of Molelord

Bennet and Empress Finas' love. His words were broken and incomplete without much continuity, but Nie Yan could still feel the general gist of it.

Everyone gazed and turned to look at each other, clear shock in their eyes. What sort of clues did this journal page contain?

They learned a few things.

The Crystal Caverns was probably where Crystalline Molelord Bennet resided. This Molelord wasn't an ordinary Lord but rather a named one, which was often much tougher to deal with. This most likely meant clearing the Crystal Caverns would be much more difficult than they originally anticipated.

In addition, who was Empress Finas? Why would she be important enough to appear in this journal? The page raised so many questions, but without any further information they could only make simple guesses.

"Let's just keep it for now. There'll probably be more clues later on," Nie Yan decided after quickly reading through the page Bladelight passed him.

Nie Yan tried to recall what he knew about Crystalline Molelord Bennet. But to his disappointment, he didn't remember anything. The vast majority of things he memorized were related to Calore, to the extent he could recall every nook and cranny. But when it came to Glory City, he was a bit helpless. He knew the general layout of the land because it was still pretty close to Calore, but he had truly been too poorly off in the previous timeline. He knew practically nothing about the lore surrounding Glory City.

Chapter 311 – Necklace of Deception

Nie Yan opened up the official website and searched up a few keywords such as Bennet and Empress Finas.

He found an information page on Empress Finas. She was the leader of an ancient tribe of spider worshipers that resided in the Underworld. The tribe was classified as a neutral evil faction, often attacking other races indiscriminately. Humans or even fellow inhabitants of the Underworld like Dark Elves and Fallen were all regarded as food. They were called Arachne for their distinctly sharp jaws.

Nie Yan skimmed through this brief background information.

The Crystalline Moleguards collapsed to the ground at a steady pace.

The group's teamwork was extremely smooth as they whittled down the enemies.

After 20 minutes, only a single Crystalline Moleguard remained. This one was also a Level 50 Elite. But unlike the others, its skin was crimson instead of bluish-green.

"It looks different from the others," Bladelight pointed out. "It might be related to the quest!" He rammed his shield into the Crystalline Moleguard's massive frame, then bellowed out with a Demoralizing Shout, firmly attracting its aggro.

The Mages unleashed a hail of spells while Nie Yan circled around and slashed down on the Crystalline Moleguard's back with Zennarde's Sword.

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Spells ruthlessly bombarded the Crystalline Moleguard as sparks flew out everywhere.

Bladelight slowly pulled the Crystalline Moleguard to a nearby

open area. The group members were scattered in the surroundings. There were 7 Warriors, 1 Paladin, 3 Thieves, 6 Mages, and 2 Priests for a total of 19 players. They had a bit too many Warriors, but it was still a balanced team composition. Besides, there were advantages in having a larger number of frontliners.

The Crystalline Moleguard struggled and thrashed about ceaselessly. But the Warriors firmly held their ground, not giving it any chance to break out of the encirclement.

When the Crystalline Moleguard's health fell to 20%, it let out an angry roar. Its body swelled in size and its skin glowed hot red.

The Crystalline Moleguard slammed down with its pike, pushing Bladelight and the other Warriors back with Seismic Slam.

In the same instant, Nie Yan avoided the attack with Gale Step.

After breaking free of the encirclement, the Crystalline Moleguard charged toward the Mages.

Nie Yan suddenly emerged out of nowhere and tossed out a pouch of Intermediate Flash Powder.「Poof!」A flash of blinding light enveloped the surroundings, causing the Crystalline Moleguard to cry out in pain. Its vision was adapted to the poor lighting of the Crystal Caverns, so the Flash Powder was even more effective. It ran around frantically like a headless chicken.

Nie Yan had used the Flash Powder at the perfect moment. Were it not for his quick reaction, the Crystalline Moleguard would've already started wreaking havoc on the Mages in the backline.

This red Crystalline Moleguard was a tough nut. It was much harder to deal with than the others. The Mages quickly retreated.

Just as the blindness was about to wear off, another pouch of Flash Powder exploded in front of the Crystalline Moleguard's eyes. Two pouches of Flash Powder was the limit. The third would most likely have no effect whatsoever.

The Mages went all out, especially Tang Yao who practically never stopped firing spells. They threw caution to the wind, no longer caring about aggro.

Only now did Bladelight and the other Warriors come out of their stuns. They quickly moved to surround the Crystalline Moleguard.

The Crystalline Moleguard's health rapidly plummeted. It only had a tiny sliver remaining.

"It's almost dead! Everybody, give it that final push!" Nie Yan shouted.

Everybody stepped up the pace. When Tang Yao landed the killing blow, the Crystalline Moleguard let out a mournful cry. Its entire body was giving off steam while its head started swelling up like a balloon.

"Everyone, get out of the way!" Nie Yan called out as he suddenly had a bad premonition.

Nie Yan, Bladelight, and the others quickly fled as far away as possible.

The Crystalline Moleguard kept swelling up before finally reaching a critical point.「Boom!」It exploded in a rain of blood and gore that splattered all over Bladelight, Smoke Stub, and the other five Warriors.

Even the faraway Mages felt the shockwave of the explosion.

A naked imp-like creature suddenly emerged from the corpse of the Crystalline Moleguard. It had hands resembling claws, arms covered in fine bristle-like hairs, and a pair of appendages that protruded out of its cheeks like fangs. Aside from these features, it looked just like an ordinary person!

It was actually living inside of the Crystalline Moleguard! Nie Yan, who hadn't been hit by the Crystalline Moleguard's explosion, was closest in proximity to this creature. It immediately pounced toward him.

Its hands were the sharpest weapons.

This was an Arachne like the ones mentioned in Empress Finas' information page!

It was extremely fast, appearing in front of Nie Yan in the blink of an eye!

Nie Yan instantly activated Shadow Waltz and disappeared without a trace.

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」The Mages bombarded the Arachne with spells to attract its attention.

While hidden within the shadows, Nie Yan inspected the Arachne with Transcendent Insight.

Arachne Finnie (Elite): Level 50

Health: 2,200/2,200

It wasn't very tanky at only 2,200 health, but for every weakness there was also a strength. Just as it was about to shift targets, Lofty Shadow rammed into it from the side with a Shield Bash.

The Arachne was sent flying by the impact but landed gently on the ground, whereupon it pounced toward one of the Mages.

With a stab of its claw-like hands, the Mage's more than 900 health was instantly reduced to 0. He collapsed dead on the ground.

Before it could move onto another target, Nie Yan threw out a pouch of Intermediate Flash Powder.「Poof!」It was temporarily blinded by the dazzling radiance.

Nie Yan circled behind it and slashed its neck with Cut Throat as a dazzling streak of red blossomed in the air.

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Nie Yan then followed up with Backstab and Eviscerate. Meanwhile, Tang Yao and the other Mages never stopped bombarding it with spells. The Arachne's health instantly plummeted by more than half.

It swung around and swiped at Nie Yan. However, he avoided the attack with the Shadow Dancer's footwork and activated Disappear to vanish into stealth.

A string of damage values floated up above Arachne Finnie's head. It let out a growl as it scanned its surroundings. It suddenly locked onto a silhouette and pounced toward the stealthed Nie Yan.

Crap! He found me! Nie Yan quickly fled for his life. For every bit of distance he covered, he would be giving more time for his teammates to attack and for the burn and bleed damage to continue chipping away at its health.

The Arachne's health continuously fell.

It quickly caught up to Nie Yan and stabbed toward his back with its right hand.

The Arachne only had about 500 health remaining. Just as its attack was about to land, Nie Yan avoided it with a sharp pivot of his body.

Vital Strike!

Nie Yan's dagger slashed the Arachne's neck as their bodies crossed. His movements were sharp and decisive.

The Arachne far out-classed Nie Yan in both movement speed and attack speed. But he could rely on his experience to predict its movements, allowing him to dodge while simultaneously retaliating with an attack of his own. This was something unimaginable to ordinary players.

Nie Yan's Vital Strike dealt over 300 damage to the Arachne.

Thanks to the Ignore Level property of Zennarde's Sword, Nie Yan could still deal massive damage even against Level 50 Elites. He could hit much harder than his Level 40 teammates.

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」Six spells bombarded the Arachne's body and finally shaved away its last bit of health, causing it to collapse on the ground.

“Whew, that was tough.” Nie Yan breathed out a sigh of relief.

Seeing the Arachne's corpse laying on the ground, Tang Yao and the others whose nerves were stretched taut finally relaxed.

Everyone was watching nervously when the Arachne was chasing Nie Yan. None of the Warriors could provide help. Several times they even believed he was a goner for sure. However, he somehow miraculously survived. Not only this, but he also accounted for nearly half their total damage!

Young Seven and Painted Muslin walked over.

Nie Yan glanced at the corpses of their comrades on the ground. “Go ahead and revive them all.”

Only after reviving these teammates could they continue exploring deeper.

“It definitely wasn't easy taking down that Arachne. I wonder what sort of stuff it dropped,” Tang Yao said. It would only be a matter of course for such a strong monster to drop high-quality equipment. There was also a high likelihood of it dropping a quest item.

Nie Yan spotted three pieces of equipment beside the Arachne's corpse. He bent down to pick them up.

There was an Arcane Mage's accessory and surprisingly a necklace.

This was a strange necklace. It was made out of ash-gray metal while three sharp fangs were attached to it. It was simple an

unadorned.

Nie Yan glanced over the necklace's properties.

Necklace of Deception (Dark Gold): Special Item

Requirements: Focus +50, Cloaking +30

Description: This item is divided into two states: Righteous and Evil. In the Righteous state, the player will show up as part of the Righteous Faction. In the Evil state, the player will show up as part of the Evil Faction. All stats -30% upon activating this item for 3 hours. Cooldown: 1 day. (Can be seen through by some skills.)

Restrictions: None

Nie Yan raised an eyebrow when he saw the Necklace of Deception's properties. It was definitely a useful thing. He clearly understood the value of such an item.

Chapter 312 – Great Thief Skill Book

Two nations represented the Evil Faction in the Underworld. When Righteous Faction players entered their domain, they would suffer from heavy stat penalties. Not only this, but they would also be attacked on sight by players of the Evil Faction.

The two factions were constantly at war. All sorts of magical trinkets and baubles from the Underworld would appear in the Hilton Stronghold every year.

Aside from the Hilton Stronghold, players could also reach the territory of the Evil Faction through the numerous tunnels leading to the Underworld.

Many of the high reward quests issued in Calore required travelling to the Underworld.

One could imagine the difficulty of completing a quest in the territory of the Evil Faction as a player from the Righteous Faction. Apart from being pursued by hordes of Evil Faction players, you would also have to be wary of crossing paths with an Evil Faction NPC, some of whom could kill you in an instant.

But with the Necklace of Deception, that all changed. Nie Yan could use it to disguise himself as part of the Evil Faction.

Of course the Necklace of Deception could be seen through with skills such as Eye of Truth.

The Necklace of Deception was similar to the Jewel of Disguise. But its duration was much longer which made it more practical for questing in the territory of the Evil Faction.

The Necklace of Deception might be of little use to ordinary players. But Nie Yan knew many quests that required him to travel to the Underworld.

Nie Yan would definitely be travelling there often in the future. He never thought a Necklace of Deception would drop here. What

luck!

Nie Yan looked at the other group members. “Does anyone need this?” Even though he had use for the Necklace of Deception, as their guild leader, he couldn’t simply take it without saying anything.

“No, I don’t think any of us can use it.” Tang Yao shook his head. He almost felt a headache coming on after looking at the complicated description of the Necklace of Deception. It might allow the player to switch factions, but it didn’t give any stats. In fact, it actually reduced them! Who would have any use for such an item?

Nie Yan shifted his attention to Smoke Stub, Bladelight, and the others.

Smoke Stub shook his head. “We don’t have any use for this item right now. We’ll just borrow it from you if we ever do.”

Although they could see the use of the Necklace of Deception, opportunities to travel to the territory of the Evil Faction didn’t just drop from the sky. They might not necessarily be able to use this item effectively either.

“Alright, I’ll be taking this Necklace of Deception then. If you guys ever need it, just let me know.” Nie Yan was about to compensate the group members with guild merit points when he was interrupted.

“No need.” Smoke Stub stopped Nie Yan. What need would contracted members like them have for guild merit points? Their equipment was directly given to them by the guild, even their mounts were.

At the strong refusal from the group members, Nie Yan gave up trying to compensate them.

“What’s the last thing that dropped?” Bladelight asked. Aside from the Arcane Mage accessory and Necklace of Deception, there

was one final item left!

Nie Yan picked up the item. It was a ruined journal page with a few things written on it.

I am deeply in love with Empress Finas. Her face is deeply imprinted into my mind... She's so compassionate... Her flawless angelic body appears to be carved out of the most brilliant crystal... It's a pity she's an empress while I'm just a lowly slave, a Moleman... Even the wretched can still feel love...

Nie Yan was especially touched by the last line. Wasn't he also a wretch in his past life? Back then, he deeply clung onto his love for Xie Yao. Only after reincarnating did he break out of his cocoon and emerge as a dazzling butterfly.

Nie Yan roughly gathered a few clues from this journal page. It appeared the plot of the story revolved around Molelord Bennett and Empress Finas. As for what happened next, he would have to look for the remaining journal pages to find out. He wondered how this quest concluded.

"Do you think we can handle a Lord-class Crystalline Moleman?" Bladelight asked. If they almost wiped against Elites, what did this say about their chances when facing a Lord?

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there. If we wipe, so be it. Just make sure we don't drop all our equipment," Nie Yan replied. They could only give it their best shot, even if it meant facing the possibility of wiping at the final stretch.

"I guess that's all we can do." Bladelight nodded.

"You guys keep advancing. I'm going to explore further ahead." Nie Yan wanted to scout out the Molelord's position, so they would have some time to prepare. The consequences would be dire if they ended up unwittingly bumping into it.

"Will you be fine all by yourself?" Bladelight asked.

After all, this was a Level 50 Map! Everyone's attention was

focused on Nie Yan.

Nie Yan confidently smiled. “Don’t worry. I have quite a few tricks left. If I end up meeting danger, I’ll have no problem escaping.”

These words contained no arrogance. On top of owning all sorts of escape skills, he still had the Unknown Transfer Scroll! No one was better than him at staying alive!

The group members also realized this. Since the founding of Asskickers United, Nie Yan had survived dangerous situations numerous times by relying on his outstanding skills.

By now, the fallen teammates were revived. They sat down to recover their health and mana.

“Alright, just be careful,” Bladelight said. They had faith in Nie Yan, so they didn’t try to stop him.

“Mhm, let me know if anything happens.” Nie Yan bid everyone farewell, then disappeared into stealth.

Nie Yan departed from the group. He planned to open up the path ahead and search for more clues related to the quest. The Crystal Caverns was a huge map. It was filled with winding and twisting paths that connected with each other. Crystalline Molemen were everywhere, roaming every passageway and chamber.

Nie Yan snuck past numerous Crystalline Molemen along the path. His Cloaking and Stealth were very high, allowing him to completely ignore these Crystalline Molemen. He travelled through the snaking tunnels and headed deeper down.

When Nie Yan turned back, he could no longer see the others.

This area was full of crystal ores. Nie Yan guessed that in his previous life this was a prime mining site.

The vast majority of players would learn one or two gathering

skills. They would earn a decent profit by selling the materials they collected in the marketplace.

Nie Yan had learned the Mining skill in the previous timeline. He knew the feeling of holing himself up in a mining site and digging day in, day out. He understood the type of soul-sucking loneliness that seeped into a person's marrow! Back then, he had no family and could only patiently endure. His hatred was the only thing that kept him going. This was a sorrowful memory. But the tragedy of his past life was what tempered his heart. In this life, no matter how much suffering and hardship he faced, he would definitely become a dragon amongst men!

Nie Yan arrived at a fork in the path. One tunnel was a bit more spacious than the other. He reckoned the former led to Molelord Bennett.

Based on Nie Yan's experience, the other tunnel led to a branching line in the quest.

Nie Yan entered the narrow tunnel and saw eight Crystalline Moleguards up ahead. However, there were many environmental obstacles in the vicinity. This group was much easier to deal with than the previous one.

These Crystalline Moleguards completely blocked off the path forward. Nie Yan surveyed the surroundings. Getting past this area won't be that difficult. He activated the Crawler Ring and started climbing up the wall to the ceiling and made his way forward.

Before long, Nie Yan got past the Crystalline Moleguards. He let go of the ceiling and landed back on the ground.

After walking through the narrow tunnel for a while, Nie Yan's eyes locked onto a shimmering treasure chest in the distance. It was carved from translucent dark crystal and was covered in all sorts of runic designs.

It was a Dark Gold Chest!

A Level 50 Dark Gold Chest! Nie Yan's heart skipped a beat. He quickly walked over, bent down, and started opening it.

Opening Treasure Chest... Estimated Completion: 3%... 5%... 3% ... 7%...

The chest was opening at a snail's pace. As the seconds turned into minutes passed, a Crystalline Moleman wandered over to Nie Yan's area, forcing him to move away from the treasure chest. He circled behind the Moleman and stunned it with Smothering Strike, then finished it off with several quick attacks.

Nie Yan walked back and continued trying to open the chest. Crystalline Molemen would often pass through this area. Many times he was forced to stop and deal with them.

But eventually, the chest opened with a click.

A crisp system notification popped up.

Lockpicking Specialist has ranked up to Advanced.

Lockpicking Specialist ranked up? Nie Yan remembered Lockpicking Specialist was still a ways off from ranking up. It shouldn't have reached Advanced this quickly. He checked his system messages. It appeared successfully opening the Dark Gold Chest gave his Lockpicking Specialist 35 mastery points, allowing it to instantly reach Advanced.

Nie Yan rummaged through the chest before fishing out a thick skill book.

The skill book was lettered in gold. It was covered in peculiar runes. Nie Yan's eyebrows jumped. This was an Adept Skill Book! But on second thought, he was already in a Level 50 map, not to mention he opened a Dark Gold Chest. Finding an Adept Skill Book wasn't all that strange.

Chapter 313 – Empress Finas’ Fate Pearl

Adept Skill Books were different from ordinary or Advanced Skill Books. Being combat focused and possessing the special characteristics of their associated Adept Class, they tended to be far more powerful than ordinary skills while lacking the disadvantage of having long cooldowns like Advanced Skills.

Nie Yan continued rummaging through the Dark Gold Chest but found nothing else. He examined the Great Thief Skill Book.

Reverse Grip Backstab (Freedom Skill)

Description: Become invincible for 2 seconds after evading an enemy’s attack, circle behind them and retaliate with an attack. Enhances Backstab damage.

Requirements: Action (Weapon), 50 Rage

Properties: Deal an additional 100%–300% damage. Ignores armour.

Cooldown: 30 Seconds

Restrictions: Great Thief; can be learned by any faction.

The Thief class was divided into Thief, Great Thief, and Shadow Dancer. With each class advancement, they gained more flexibility in combat. Especially after reaching Shadow Dancer at which point all skills could be used at will. With a wider range of freedom, their combat power increased exponentially.

Players could start learning Freedom Skills after reaching the Adept class, and Reverse Grip Backstab was precisely one of them.

This skill was quite powerful. It provided invincibility after evading an attack and enhanced his Backstab damage. Not to mention its cooldown was only 30 seconds.

But since Reverse Grip Backstab was a Freedom Skill, Nie Yan would have to spend some time gradually mastering it.

Freedom Skill Books were far more expensive than most mounts and Advanced Skill Books, regularly selling for over 10,000 gold in the previous timeline. This was testament to their popularity among the player base. Add this to their scarcity, and it explained why you might not even find 1 in 10,000 players with a Freedom Skill.

Most Thieves wouldn't have more than five or six Freedom Skills by the time they stepped into the ranks of a Shadow Dancer.

Nie Yan had once obtained a Freedom Skill Book after becoming a Great Thief in his past life, but his poor financial situation at the time forced him to sell it to a Shadow Dancer.

In this life, Nie Yan naturally wouldn't repeat such a shameful act. He put the Reverse Grip Backstab Skill Book in his bag. He could learn it when he advanced to a Great Thief at Level 50.

Nie Yan continued searching around in the hopes of finding other treasures. After passing through numerous tunnels, he arrived at the entrance to a room with man-made structures. The walls were polished smooth and engraved with tadpole-like characters that he couldn't read.

The lighting here was dark and a bit eerie.

Nie Yan hesitated for a moment before cautiously proceeding forward. As he stepped on a floor tile, a biting cold travelled up his feet. Suddenly, there was a slight tremble as some sort of mechanism activated underground.

"It's a trap!" Nie Yan cried out in alarm, only to see sharp arrow tips emerge out of the walls around him.

These arrows densely lined the walls and emanated a murderous aura.

Nie Yan didn't dare to move even an inch. As soon as his foot broke contact with the tile, the arrows would fire and he would be transformed into a human pin cushion!

With death staring him in the face, Nie Yan sucked in a breath of cold air.

Thankfully, his gut instinct was correct, allowing him to detect the trap in time.

However, he couldn't stand here forever!

Nie Yan looked up ahead. The arrows lining the walls stretched out for the next 10 meters.

That's right! I still have the Leaper Ring in my bag!

Nie Yan equipped the Leaper Ring. He determined his landing spot, then leaped high into the air like a grasshopper. The sound of arrows firing rang out behind him as he flew across the danger zone.

Nie Yan landed safely on the other side. When he turned around, countless arrows covered the ground, protruding out like stalks in a rice paddy. Seeing this scene, he felt as though he had gained a new lease on life.

Nie Yan continued exploring further, being especially wary of any traps. Although most of them were extremely well-hidden, not a single one escaped his sharp senses. Nevertheless, it was a thrilling experience. He had nearly died quite a few times!

Nie Yan eventually arrived at the entrance of a sealed off chamber after travelling through a narrow passageway. He let out a gasp when he looked up ahead. Before him was a terrifying, 10-meter black spider hanging in the center of a massive web!

This was Nie Yan's first time seeing such a monster in both lifetimes. He quickly retreated back into the narrow passageway to avoid being attacked. He observed the spider from a safe distance. It was incomparably ugly, with eight enormous beady eyes, and its body covered in fine, steel-like hairs. Upon further observation, he discovered it didn't move whatsoever. Its eyes were hollow and vacant.

Is it dead? Nie Yan was dazed for a moment. He cautiously crept around and discovered that the spider's back was split open. It was just an empty shell!

Even if it wasn't alive, it was still terrifying.

Nie Yan saw a pearl shimmering on a web-covered stone platform below the spider. It was entirely black, perfectly round, and about the size of his fist.

Nie Yan couldn't help but be attracted to it.

What is that?

Nie Yan took out his crossbow and started randomly shooting in search for booby traps.

The arrows struck the ground, wall, and ceiling of this chamber in quick succession. Some of them even pierced through the spider's carapace. But nothing happened.

After confirming there was no danger, Nie Yan carefully walked over to the stone platform, still cautious of any traps below his feet.

Nie Yan took a deep breath, then reached out and grabbed the pearl, whereupon he felt a cool sensation travel up his arm.

The pearl was smooth and glossy without the slightest blemish.

Nie Yan held the pearl in his palm and examined it.

Empress Finas' Fate Pearl: Special Item

Properties: Night Vision +12, Darkness Awareness +12, Dark Magic Effect +100%.

Additional Quest Property: Weaken Empress Finas' stats by 30%.

Note: Item effects are applied immediately upon entering the player's bag.

Nie Yan reckoned this Empress Finas' Fate Pearl was worth well over 10,000 gold. In the Righteous Faction, equipment that

increased Night Vision was extremely rare. Its value could be well-imagined since even a piece of equipment with only Night Vision +1 sold for a bare minimum of 10 gold in the marketplace. Darkness Awareness was also extremely valuable, allowing the player to detect an opponent's position more easily in the dark. Not to mention its effects were active while in the player's bag. It was very difficult to appraise the value of these properties. As for the Dark Magic Effect +100%, it was also useful to him since it would increase the success rate of Undead Rite!

Nie Yan's eyebrows jumped after seeing the Night Vision property on Empress Finas' Fate Pearl. A thought flashed across his mind.

Night Vision Equipment!

Equipment with Night Vision +1 only cost around 50 silver in the Evil Faction, but their value skyrocketed to more than 10 gold in the Righteous Faction! Nie Yan could already imagine how much profit could be made off this difference.

With the Necklace of Deception in his possession, there wasn't much of a challenge for him to travel to the Evil Faction and buy whatever he pleased in their marketplace. Loaded with items he could sell at a premium in the Righteous Faction, he would return and stock his own auction houses!

In the previous timeline, many players attempted to sell items from the Righteous Faction to the Evil Faction and vice-versa from players in the Evil Faction. But all of them would end up failing. The reason was simple. Righteous Faction and Evil Faction players were not allowed to communicate, trade, or have any form of contact with each other whatsoever. If a player was found to be smuggling items, they would be punished by the NPCs of their respective side.

Righteous Faction items were not allowed to be transported to the Evil Faction. Even if they were deliberately abandoned for Evil

Faction players to pick up, as long as the sum value of the items exceeded 10 gold, it was treason by Calore's law. The law enforcements would track down the perpetrator and arrest them.

However Nie Yan's plan of selling items from the Evil Faction to the Righteous Faction was allowed. But if he attempted to do the opposite, regardless of the method, Calore's law enforcement would immediately come looking for him as soon as he stepped foot in the city. These actions were tantamount to treason. Even the title of Grand Scholar couldn't protect him at that time. Due to this, it was very hard for items to circulate on both sides.

One could never have too much money. Nie Yan reckoned if he went over to the Evil Faction and brought back five bag fulls of high-level equipment, he could easily make a profit of 50,000–60,000 gold.

It was possible to sell 50 gold worth of equipment from the Evil Faction for up to 1,000 gold in the Righteous Faction, especially if it was Night Vision Equipment.

If Nie Yan could transport items from the Evil Faction over to this side, he would definitely sell them across the various cities in the Viridian Empire. Besides that, he would also stock up Asskickers United's treasury.

Naturally, this was only a plan. He didn't know if it would actually succeed. But with so much potential for profit, it was worth giving a try.

Nie Yan put Empress Finas' Fate Pearl in his bag. This item would probably have a use in the quest later on. He searched the room for other items but came up empty. He retraced his steps as he went to regroup with the others.

「How's things on your side?」Nie Yan asked in voice chat.

「Sun found the Molelord,」Bladelight informed. Now, they were just waiting for Nie Yan.

Chapter 314 – Undying Soul

Nie Yan glanced at Empress Finas' Fate Pearl in his bag, wondering when it would come in handy. Let's deal with the Molelord first. He withdrew his gaze.

「Have you found the other journal pages?」Nie Yan asked. Those pages also contained clues to the quest.

「We've found three pages. Combine those with the two on you, and we'll have the complete journal,」Bladelight replied. They only obtained these three pages after killing numerous Molemen and opening several chests.

Bladelight shared what was written on the last three journal pages.

Even though I'm well aware Empress Finas only wants my body as a tool, I'm still happy to become her vessel... I'm just a lowly Crystalline Moleman, but I'm willing to offer up both my life and this useless body for the sake of showing her my love... My dear Empress Finas, during those long winter nights, when both my soul and body have long since faded into dust, will you still recall the silly love of this lowly Crystalline Moleman...?

Although the journal pages were easy to collect, it appeared there was still a secret hidden within them that had yet to be uncovered.

「I'll be there right away,」Nie Yan said. He travelled through numerous winding tunnels and arrived back at the fork in the path. There, he spotted Bladelight and the others who were recovering their health and mana.

“Where's Sun and One Strike Vow?” Nie Yan asked after not seeing them.

“They're scouting out the path ahead,” Bladelight replied. Sun and One Strike Vow had discovered the Molelord's location before Nie Yan.

“Take out the other three journal pages for me,” Nie Yan said. He wondered what kind of transformation would occur when all five pages were brought together.

Bladelight handed over the journal pages to Nie Yan.

After completing the trade, the three journal pages fell into Nie Yan’s bag. With the five pages gathered together, they emitted a flash of brilliant light and combined into a complete journal, albeit still badly damaged like before.

Bennett’s Journal: Undying Soul, Love of a Lowly Moleman (Quest Item)

Description: It possesses boundless mysterious power. The owner of this journal will be guided by a soul. Search for traces of Empress Finas. Weakens Molelord Bennett’s stats by 30%.

Empress Finas left the Crystal Caverns for the Underworld 1,000 years ago. She completely drained the life of Molelord Bennet, leaving behind a corpse with an Undying Soul. No matter how many times he is killed, he will revive when night descends.

The journal appeared extremely old. A halo of light containing the power to pierce space revolved around it.

Nie Yan’s intuition told him that this journal wasn’t simple. It was probably connected to a larger quest chain.

“It seems like this quest requires you to go the Underworld. You should think of a way on your own. I’m afraid we can’t help you.” Smoke Stub helplessly smiled. At the current stage of the game, only Thieves could travel to the Underworld. With their stealthing abilities, they could still get around without instantly being ganged up on by players of the Evil Faction.

At present, the fight between the warring factions was still limited to the borders. Very few players dared to enter the enemy’s territory. The deeper in they were, the heavier the stat penalty. Someone had once done the calculations in the previous timeline.

When a player was roaming near the capital of an enemy faction, their stats would be reduced by as much as 60%. This wasn't a trivial matter. Under such circumstances, a Level 50 Righteous Player probably wouldn't even be a match for a Level 40 Evil Player.

Out of everyone in the group, Nie Yan was the most suited to do this quest. Sun had made decent progress, but he was still too wet behind the ears. As for One Strike Vow, she wouldn't be willing to stay in a gloomy Underworld city for a prolonged period of time.

"We'll see after things settle down," Nie Yan replied. He would definitely visit the Underworld, if not only to at least check out the situation there.

At this moment, Sun and One Strike Vow returned. Bladelight stepped slightly off to the side.

"How did things go?" Nie Yan asked.

"We found the Molelord. It's guarded by several dozen Moleguards and 600 Crystalline Molemen," One Strike Vow replied, then glanced at Bladelight.

Nie Yan patted Bladelight's shoulder. "Man up, don't keep the pretty girl waiting."

What kind of figure was Bladelight? He was a top 3 Fighter in the previous timeline. In this life, he had also gained fame as a core elite of Asskickers United. He was normally the stoic and no-nonsense type. But just as Achilles had his heel, Bladelight turned timid as a mouse in front of One Strike Vow. This was quite a marvel.

"Let's go take a look together," Nie Yan said. Afterwards, they would decide their course of action.

The group set out for the Molelord. They eventually arrived at a large chamber with a 60-meter high ceiling and a diameter of 1,000 meters. It was like entering an underground world.

An enormous Crystalline Moleman appeared in everyone's vision. It was 6 meters tall and completely red, resembling a titan from antiquity. There were also more than 30 Crystalline Moleguards in the vicinity.

It would be troublesome to lure them out one by one, especially considering their numbers and how close they were to each other.

“What do we do?”

Everyone tried to think of a strategy to deal with the Molelord. Nie Yan surveyed the surroundings. There were many stalactites hanging from the ceiling which looked like a good vantage point. But using his crossbow to whittle away at the numbers of these Crystalline Molemen simply wasn't practical. Who knew how long it would take? Not to mention there was no way this tactic would work against the Molelord. Its health regeneration was too high, and it was resistant to piercing damage.

A thought suddenly crossed Nie Yan's mind. If he wouldn't do, he could just send Tang Yao! Although Tang Yao didn't possess the damage to kill the Molelord, he could still clear away the mobs surrounding it.

After Nie Yan explained his plan to the group, Tang Yao's eyes lit up. “I don't know if this will work, but I'll give it a try.”

Nie Yan handed over the Crawler Ring and Silk Spinner Ring to Tang Yao. Tang Yao was already familiar with the Crawler Ring while the Silk Spinner Ring was merely a form of insurance.

Tang Yao accepted the trade, then equipped the two rings. He activated the Crawler Ring and started climbing towards the ceiling.

Nie Yan and the others watched as Tang Yao nimbly climbed up the wall like a spider.

“Even this is possible?” Everyone was speechless.

Tang Yao secured himself between two stalactites. As for his

Arcane Fairy, it was ordered to stay beside Nie Yan.

「How are you feeling?」Nie Yan asked in voice chat.

「It's a little high up, but I think I'm good!」Tang Yao replied. He started chanting and gathering fire elemental energy at a rapid pace.

A large red cloud loomed menacingly over the heads of the Crystalline Molemen. A second later, it started pouring down fireballs.「Bang! Bang! Bang!」A blanket of damage values rose up into the air.

The Crystalline Molemen were in an uproar, but they couldn't find the enemy.

“Awesome!” Tang Yao couldn't help but exclaim. He cast one spell after the other, all of which were area-of-effect and rained down ruthlessly. Before long, a large section of the crowd was cleaned out. The ground was littered with corpses.

Tang Yao's damage was terrifying. Very few monsters could withstand a shelling from one of his area-of-effect spells. The damage was equivalent to that of other peoples' Advanced Magic!

The spells never stopped falling. After five or six of them, their destructive range far surpassed that of Advanced Magic. This unrivalled barrage of magic left everyone stupefied.

Swaths of Crystalline Molemen collapsed to the ground. Even several dozen Moleguards couldn't hold on any longer. The Molelord also lost a bit of health but recovered it after just a few seconds.

Everyone was stunned by the sight of these Crystalline Molemen dropping like flies. They previously believed it would take at least five hours to whittle down their numbers. This was a tremendously tedious task. Who could've predicted Nie Yan's strategy would cut down this time to just 30 minutes!

The Crystalline Moleguards fell in quick succession.

The ground was littered with piles of sparkling equipment. The sight was enough to make ordinary players go mad with greed.

When Tang Yao stopped casting spells, only the Molelord and a few low-health Moleguards remained standing.

Tang Yao used his single-target spells to kill the remaining Moleguards.

Like this, only the Molelord was left in the chamber, which made things much easier.

Only then did everyone recognize the usefulness of Special Items, whereupon a single thought surfaced in their collective mind. I definitely need to get my hands on a few of them in the future!

Special Items were fairly rare. But due to their bizarre natures, it was difficult to determine their true value. So, one or two would occasionally pop up in the marketplace for a low price. If you were to be so lucky as to find one, you should buy it immediately, lest you be filled with endless regret for missing the opportunity later on.

Perhaps Nie Yan was the only person who could put a Special Item to full use.

“I’ll go draw the aggro. Get ready, you guys,” Nie Yan said. He sprinted off toward the Molelord.

Bladelight and the others spread out and moved into formation.

Nie Yan took aim with the Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow and fired.

「Put! Put! Put」Five bolts flew out and struck the Molelord, whereupon it let out a earth-shattering roar, causing the entire chamber to tremble violently. It was as if it wanted to bring the whole place down. It charged toward Nie Yan with bounding strides.

Chapter 315 – Molelord Bennett

Nie Yan quickly turned tail to flee. Trying to fight the Molelord was suicidal. Probably only Bladelight could tank a hit.

Bladelight raised his heavy shield and charged forward to intercept the Molelord.

Shield Bash!

The shield slammed into the Molelord with a heavy thud.

Heroic Strike!

Bladelight chopped down on the Molelord.

-56

At this moment, the others took the time to inspect the Molelord.

Molelord Bennett (Lord): Level 50

Health: 110,000/110,000

Everyone sucked in a breath of cold air. Molelord Bennett's stats were still so terrifying despite being reduced by 30% by the journal.

After being blocked by Bladelight, the Molelord swept its pike at him.

「Klang!」The pike struck the heavy shield as Bladelight felt an enormous force travel up his arm. He dug his feet into the ground and used both arms on his shield to brace against the impact. However, he was still blown back.

Bladelight was forced backwards 5 meters before finally regaining his balance.

At this moment, Lofty Shadow and Yi Yan rushed forward to cover for Bladelight.

Lofty Shadow was provided high-quality equipment by the guild. Add this to his impressive talent and skill, and he overtook Yi Yan to become the number two Fighter in Asskickers United. He was

just a step behind Bladelight in terms of tankiness.

Lofty Shadow was naturally the next one up after Bladelight was blown back.

Taunt! Lofty Shadow bellowed out, forcing the Molelord to target him.

The Molelord sent the three Fighters flying away repeatedly, but they stubbornly rushed back up every time.

All the while the Mages bombarded the Molelord with spells.

The Molelord's health started falling bit by bit.

"Bladelight, pull it toward the right," Nie Yan ordered. The uneven ground in that direction would heavily impact the Molelord's charging speed, reducing the danger it posed to the Mages in the backline.

"Got it." Bladelight nodded. He started moving towards the right, pulling the Molelord along with him.

The three Fighters worked in tandem to pull the Molelord to the right, then surrounded it and hunkered down behind their shields.

Demoralizing Shout!

Taunt!

It instantly became much harder for the Molelord to maneuver. Although it was three times their size, it was still blocked in by Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan who were like immovable boulders. Even slightly turning was a challenge.

As The Molelord swung down at Bladelight with its pike, the Priests and Paladins quickly buffed him with multiple blessings.

「Klang!」The pike smashed down on Bladelight's shield, instantly shattering the Radiant Barrier protecting him.

The Molelord's attacks were imbued with corrosive dark energy, which made them extremely effective against Light-type protective

spells.

Radiant Barrier could only endure a single hit from the Molelord!

Seeing the Molelord swing down again, Bladelight activated the Rank 8 Shield from his Everlasting Gold Set.

「Klang!」He withstood the heavy blow from the Molelord.

Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan stood their ground as they fiercely slashed down at the Molelord with their swords.

The Mages were spread out in a circle, with the Molelord at the center, as they unleashed a steady stream of spells.

Edgeless, Monochrome, and the other Berserkers jumped into the fray after the Molelord was locked down by the three Fighters. Another source of damage was added to the fight.

The Molelord's health was gradually being chipped away. It kept trying to break free of the encirclement. But Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan were like nails in the ground, refusing to budge even an inch.

Nie Yan circled around and plunged Zennarde's Sword into the Molelord, after which he activated Blast.

-288

-756!

-76

-82...

Blast landed as a critical hit and armour broke the Molelord! Furthermore, it was inflicted with burn and bleed damage!

Everyone's jaws dropped in shock. Nie Yan's attacks were simply too frightening! It was already impressive if they could deal more than 40 damage to the Molelord, while perhaps only the strongest among them could deal 100 damage. Let alone Blast, they couldn't even compare to his bleed damage!

The Molelord's aggro instantly shifted to Nie Yan. It attempted to attack him, but Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan prevented it from turning around.

At this moment, Nie Yan unleashed a flurry of ferocious attacks, causing the Molelord's health to rapidly drop.

The Ignore Armour property from Zennarde's Sword, his high critical rate, and the attack power bonus he gained when attacking an enemy from behind allowed Nie Yan to deal shocking damage.

Nie Yan knew full well that his explosive tempest of attacks would lead to the Molelord's aggro shifting solely on him. However, he had long since stopped paying this any mind.

Nie Yan relentlessly slashed away, unloading all his high-damage skills on the Molelord.

The Molelord's health finally fell to 20%. It let out a furious roar and slammed its pike into the ground, causing a massive shockwave to sweep out.

Nie Yan had already guessed this would happen. He activated Gale Step in the nick of time and avoided being stunned.

Nie Yan's years of experience allowed him to react to danger almost instantly. Coupled with the fact that Gale Step was his most familiar skill, he was already prepared the moment he saw the subtle cues that the Molelord was about to unleash a special attack.

While Nie Yan could flawlessly avoid the Molelord's attack, there was no way the others could do the same.

「Boom」Bladelight and the other Warriors were all blown back and stunned.

All the frontliners were struck by the shockwave.

After breaking free of the encirclement, the Molelord let out a furious roar. It locked on the fleeing Nie Yan and immediately charged toward him.

All the Mages quickly retreated while Nie Yan ran to an area with no people.

At this moment, the Molelord stabbed at Nie Yan with its pike.

“Careful!” Tang Yao and the others cried out in alarm.

Just as Nie Yan was about to be skewered, almost as if he grew eyes at the back of his head, he dodge-rolled off to the side.

The Molelord’s pike struck air, and it continued to chase Nie Yan.

After noticing the Molelord’s aggro was completely focused on Nie Yan, the Mages started bombarding it with spells again.

“We can do it, guys! It’s almost dead!”

“Keep at it!”

All the Mages let loose, especially Sunny South. This fellow rarely ever uttered a word. No one knew when he learned the Metamagic mastery. He was firing out spells continuously like a machine gun. When he ran out of mana, he immediately drank an Intermediate Mana Potion and continued.

Every member in the group was an elite among elites. Which one of them didn’t have a trump card or two tucked away? In this critical moment, they no longer held anything back. All of them used their most powerful skills.

The Molelord quickly caught up to Nie Yan and swung down at him with its pike. If this attack hit him, he would be crushed into a meat patty.

Nie Yan threw out a pouch of Intermediate Flash Powder.「Poof!」A dazzling radiance blossomed outward, blinding the Molelord and causing its attack to go off-target.

Nie Yan seized this opportunity to dash past the Molelord.「Bang!」Its pike smashed into the ground, causing debris to fly out everywhere.

Some of the debris struck Nie Yan, dealing between 10 to 100

damage.

Nie Yan used the Shadow Dancer footwork to circle behind the Molelord, then ruthlessly slashed down with Zennarde's Sword. He followed up with Lacerate, cutting open a gaping wound across its flesh, causing blood to spurt out into the air.

The Molelord swung its pike in a full circle. However, its surroundings were empty.

Nie Yan had immediately bolted away after executing Lacerate.

At this time, the stun on Bladelight and the other Warriors finally wore off. They rushed forward to intercept the Molelord.

The Molelord only had around 5% health remaining. It already entered a berserk state. Its skin was blood red, while its body swelled several times in size.

The Molelord struck Bladelight with its pike, sending him flying away. His health instantly emptied, and he collapsed dead to the ground.

The Molelord was unstoppable. It killed everything in its path and left behind a trail of corpses.

Seeing the Molelord's rampage, the Mages intensified their barrage as. Spells were fired out continuously.

The Molelord's health was about to hit zero.

Nie Yan noticed something was off about the Molelord. "Young Seven, stay behind! Painted Muslin, quickly get out of here. Find somewhere to hide!"

The group members immediately understood Nie Yan's intentions.

Nie Yan and Young Seven gave each other meaningful smiles.

Painted Muslin hesitated as she looked at everyone, then finally turned away and left.

A Priest was the lifeline of a team. Even if Nie Yan and the others wiped, Painted Muslin could still bring them all back.

“Everyone, one final push. It’s almost dead!” Nie Yan said. His life was in constant danger while being chased down by the Molelord. However, he relied on his Shadow Dancer footwork to avoid its attack. Several times he had only survived by a hair’s breadth.

Only Nie Yan was still alive out of all the melee-class players.

Seeing the Molelord with only a few hundred health remaining, Nie Yan went for broke. He used the Shadow Dancer footwork to circle behind it. He leaped into the air and stabbed down with Assassinate, then activated Eviscerate.

「Pu!」A fountain of blood gushed out as the Molelord let out a mournful cry.

“It’s over! Nie Yan exclaimed.

Chapter 316 – Windfall

The Molelord's health hit zero, and it heavily crashed to the ground, causing the entire cavern to shake.

Nie Yan quickly ducked for cover. When he saw no changes in the Molelord's corpse, he breathed out a sigh of relief. He believed it would explode like the Moleguard they previously encountered. This was why he ordered Painted Muslin to retreat. It appeared he was just being a worrywart.

The Molelord's corpse laid motionless on the ground. It resembled a large whale.

Nie Yan lit up with a brilliant radiance as he directly ascended to Level 35. The other members also gained at least a level.

“Boss, did anything drop?” Summer Bug asked.

Nie Yan was about to bend down to rummage for loot when he suddenly noticed the Molelord's corpse starting to swell like a balloon. Its veins were pulsating violently with a force that couldn't be restrained.

Nie Yan's face paled. “Everyone, duck!”

This was Corpse Explosion!

There were next to no monsters with this ability!

Everyone turned to flee.

「Boom!」At this instant, the Molelord's corpse exploded, sending out a powerful shock wave that swept out in all directions.

None of them had a chance to reach safety before the explosion enveloped them.

It was a complete wipeout.

Nie Yan was no exception. The Corpse Explosion was simply unavoidable. However, he didn't immediately take on astral form.

Instead, the scenery around him shifted into a white void. There were brilliant rays of light all around him as though he had arrived in the kingdom of heaven.

Nie Yan was flabbergasted. Just where the hell am I? He looked around and saw a lonely figure crouched down on its knees. He couldn't make out its appearance. It was shrouded in a blurry mist of light.

It wandered through this vast void, occasionally stopping to stare into space. Noticing the new arrival, it stared at Nie Yan in confusion.

At this moment, a strange feeling surfaced in Nie Yan's heart as various scenes of Empress Finas flashed across his mind. He could feel the boundless sorrow in the Molelord's heart.

Nie Yan's heart skipped a beat. These scenes were most likely clues on how to find Empress Finas!

The figure transformed into a ball of light and flew into Nie Yan's bag. It danced around Bennett's Journal for a while before entering inside.

Nie Yan examined the journal and noticed a few changes.

Bennett's Journal: Undying Soul, Love of a Lowly Moleman (Quest Item)

Properties: The owner of this journal is allowed to open a Dark Portal to a random location in the Underworld. A portal can be opened once every 5 days and lasts for 20 minutes.

Restrictions: Bound to Nirvana Flame. Cannot be traded or dropped.

The Dark Portal was an unpredictable skill. It could teleport you to the Underworld, but the location was random. On top of this, you would have to wait for five days if you didn't enter the portal within the 20 minute duration.

Nie Yan didn't know when he would visit the Underworld. He could conveniently check if this quest was doable while looking for items to buy over there.

After an unknown amount of time, a system notification appeared.

Ten Li Painted Muslin has revived you. Do you accept?

Yes!

With a flash of light, Nie Yan was brought back to life. He opened his eyes to see Painted Muslin and Young Seven reviving the others.

When Painted Muslin returned, she was stunned to see all of their corpses. She revived Young Seven first, after which the two of them began reviving the rest of the members together.

Nie Yan collected the loot from the Molelord's corpse. There were three items in total: a robe, a pair of gloves, and a gem, all of which were Level 50 Dark Gold-grade.

Both the robe and gloves were Arcane Mage equipment. They were part of the Dark Follower Set, an offensive-type set. The robes gave 250 magic power while the gloves gave 120 magic power.

The stats on these two pieces of equipment were superb. Out of all the level 50 sets, the Dark Follower Set gave one of the largest boosts to magic power.

A complete Dark Follower Set would probably increase magic power by over 1,000!

Nie Yan shared the information of the two pieces of equipment in the chat.

"The Molelord respawns every day. Should we collect the full set before we leave?" Smoke Stub asked. He understood just how valuable this set was.

“We’ll be staying here for the next several days, so I don’t see why not,” Nie Yan replied. It would take quite some time to clear away their red names.

With the Molelord dead, all they could do was kill ordinary Molemen until it respawned.

There were simply too many Arcane Mages in Asskickers United. A single Dark Follower Set obviously wasn’t enough to go around. So, they could only satisfy one player for the time being. Nie Yan would have to carefully consider who would receive this set. These sorts of situations arose pretty often. If handled unfairly, it could easily lead to discontent among the guild members.

Besides the two pieces of equipment from the Dark Follower Set, there was also a Dexterity Gem (7) which increased Dexterity by 35. Nie Yan planned to socket it to his own equipment.

The group sat down to recover their health and mana. Afterwards, they started farming the regular Molemen.

Nie Yan was at the back of the group, leeching experience while managing the affairs back in Calore.

Just at this moment, Nie Yan received a call from Yao Yao.

「Nirvana Flame, I’ve completed the quest. I received a Templar Magic as a reward. Thank you!」Yao Yao informed. If it wasn’t for Nie Yan’s guidance, she could’ve never done this quest.

「No problem. You’re a member of Asskickers United. It’s only natural I help.」Nie Yan chuckled.

Yao Yao felt somewhat disheartened. Besides being a guild member, was there really no other reason for him to help her? From when they first met in Lake Rando to their recent adventures in Zennarde’s Domain, did all of that mean nothing? She wished Nie Yan would like her inside the game more.

Xie Yao had only met Nie Yan a few times in real life, so there was still a bit of unfamiliarity between them. However, she felt

very comfortable with him inside the game. Levelling, running dungeons, and going on adventures together, could all of that really not compare to a few encounters in real life?

「What kind of Templar Magic did you get?」

「Holy Purification.」

Nie Yan raised an eyebrow in surprise. Holy Purification was one of the better Advanced Magics.

「Not bad.」

「The servers are going down soon. I'm heading off first!」Yao Yao pouted. Nie Yan only cared whether or not she was an asset to the guild!

「Alright, see you later.」Nie Yan didn't say anything else despite picking up the discontent in Yao Yao's voice. He checked the clock. It was about time for him to log off as well.

Seeing Yao Yao's name go dim on his friend list, Nie Yan sorted through the day's profit. He had made over 1,000 gold from the Union of Assassins, 5,000 gold from the Starry Night Potion Shop, 2,000 gold from leases, and 5,000 gold from his auction houses and the Super Trade Channel. That was over 13,000 gold in total! Even the Dragonsoar Financial Group only brought in roughly 30,000 gold a day through their various channels! What's more, all these projects were still developing. In the future, they would rake in even more gold!

Besides these earnings, Nie Yan had also sold several real world business districts to the Dragonsoar Financial Group. A portion of the gold was given to Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine, but most of it went into his back pocket.

Asskickers United no longer required Nie Yan's financial support. The Dragonsoar Financial Group's investments sufficed. He averted his attention to other guilds. His next target was Battle Crazy Alliance in Hilderlocke!

In the previous timeline, Battle Crazy Alliance had received the backing of the West Pool Financial Group, the sixth largest financial group in Asia. However, they eventually withdrew their investments due to Cao Xu's actions. His unbridled spending and massive bribes had poached away many of Battle Crazy Alliance's professional players. Add to this the pressure from Victorious Return, Radiant Sacred Flame, and Bloodlust Blades that put the guild's very existence at stake, and withdrawing had been the only logical course of action for the financial group.

Battle Crazy Alliance mostly likely hadn't been acquired by a financial group yet. Since that was the case, it was the perfect time for Nie Yan to take action.

Nie Yan told Guo Huai to talk to Kill Love about the matter of investment since it wouldn't be appropriate to do this personally. If Kill Love agreed, he would invest in Battle Crazy Alliance under his own name. The details of their cooperation could be discussed at that time.

Just as Nie Yan finished arranging these matters, he received a call from Tuoba Time.

「Do you have any gold? I'm short on funds.」Tuoba Time got straight to the point.

「How much do you need?」Nie Yan asked. Tuoba Time was quite a rich fellow. He would have no problem obtaining 50,000 gold. If he was asking to borrow money, it definitely wouldn't be a small sum.

「I need 600,000 gold in a month's time,」Tuoba Time replied.

Nie Yan gasped.「What do you need so much gold for?」600,000 gold was easily more than enough to acquire a large guild! He thought about it for a moment. Based on how much he made every day, although it would be difficult, it was still possible.

「If you help me get this gold, I'm willing to give you 30% of the

Tuoba Family's assets in Conviction. This includes 11 shops, 21 plots of land, and 3 auction houses!」Tuoba Time dropped another bomb on Nie Yan.

These assets might only be worth 20,000 gold right now. However, their value would skyrocket to 80,000 gold in just a month's time and who knew how much more further down the line. Yet Tuoba Time was willingly sell them to Nie Yan for the measly price of 600,000 gold!

Chapter 317 – War God Tribe

Tuoba Time approaching Nie Yan at this moment signified he was about to take action. As one of the Tuoba Family's shareholders, he absolutely wasn't willing to fall under Tuoba Hongye. The power struggle between the two sides was only just beginning.

The 600,000 gold would be a starting capital to oppose Tuoba Hongye.

「If you have the 600,000 gold, we can sign a contract right now. Otherwise, just tell me how much you can spare. I need at least 50,000 gold by today,」Tuoba Time said. This matter was of extreme urgency.

「I can do it,」Nie Yan said. He would regret it for a lifetime if he missed this opportunity!

Aside from developing Asskickers United, Nie Yan also wished to become a rich tycoon in the real world. When the profit from his auction houses, leases, shops, and strongholds grew to a certain point, he would convert a huge portion of it into credits.

He absolutely couldn't pass up Tuoba Time's offer!

With Nie Yan's current capital, it absolutely wouldn't be a problem for him to gobble up these auction houses, plots of land, and shops.

「Where are your auction houses, shops, and plots of land located?」Nie Yan asked. These assets were probably not in Calore. After all, there was only one auction house in Calore that wasn't his.

「Nisode City,」Tuoba Time replied.

Nisode City was the second largest city in the Viridian Empire. A portion of the Tuoba Family's capital was concentrated there. They owned a large number of auction houses, plots of land, shops,

and three guilds in that region.

Nie Yan's eyes lit up. The War God Tribe operated in Nisode City in his past life!

In the previous timeline, the majority of Nisode City was controlled by the Tuoba Family. But they were suddenly beaten black and blue by the recently established War God Tribe. Back then, Nie Yan's father had acquired over 20 of the top 100 gaming organizations across the nation. Furthermore, he had also invited many veterans who started working as professional players after retiring from the army. Although the War God Tribe had swept away the Tuoba Family's three guilds with unrivalled momentum, they were always plagued by a lack of in-game currency since their only source of income was a single auction house in Nisode City. If Nie Yan took over the Tuoba Family's businesses in Nisode City and used them to support the War God Tribe, its rise to power would be even more spectacular this time around.

If Asskickers United and the War God Tribe worked together to deal with Victorious Return, the only ones that could contend against them in the entire Viridian Empire were Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors!

Nie Yan could tell Tuoba Time was different from his usual lazy and casual self. It appeared as if he was a sword drawn of its scabbard. Nie Yan was looking forward to see if he could drag Tuoba Hongye off his pedestal.

「I have a request. Is it possible for you to transfer those auction houses, shops, and plots of land to me first? I'm willing to pay an extra 6,000 gold a day.」Nie Yan asked. He could connect the three auction houses and shops in Nisode City to the Super Trade Channel. While they remained under the control of Tuoba Time, they likely wouldn't net more than 5,000 gold a day. But if he could get his hands on them, he was confident he could boost that number to at least 8,000.

「Let's sign a contract. I'll have someone draft one up,」Tuoba Time replied. All he needed was gold. He was more than willing to give up his businesses in Nisode City if it meant he would gain control of all the Tuoba Family's operations in Conviction! All of Tuoba Hongye's efforts would've gone to waste! Afterwards, he would find a way to swallow up Tuoba Hongye's shares in the real world!

It didn't take long for Nie Yan to receive the contract. After confirming the terms, he signed his name.

「I'll immediately tell someone to deposit the first payment of 60,000 gold into your account,」Nie Yan said. Meanwhile, he had Guo Huai take over management of the auction houses in Nisode City, then connected them to the Super Trade Channel.

Guo Huai had also persuaded the owner of the remaining auction house in Calore to join the Super Trade Channel. With this, the Super Trade Channel held a complete monopoly in Calore as well as a majority market share in Nisode City.

Over the next three days, Nie Yan would go to school during the day and level with Smoke Stub and the others in the Crystal Caverns during the night. After clearing the map, they discovered the Molelord had become easier to deal with. The difficulty had dropped by a significant amount.

During these three days, the business in his auction houses was booming thanks to the Super Trade Channel. Furthermore, the Starry Night Potion Shop had also greatly expanded its influence, especially in Nisode City where branch stores popped up all over. Adding all his revenue streams together, Nie Yan's daily profit had risen to over 20,000 gold. This kind of growth was unprecedented. If the large financial groups were to catch wind of this, they would start breaking out in a cold sweat. After all, they had to invest an enormous sum to acquire their gold, but Nie Yan hadn't spent a single cent in real life! His achievements were nothing short of a miracle!

Like clockwork, Nie Yan took off his game helmet and headed downstairs. Mother Nie originally planned to eat breakfast with him today, but she rushed out the door after being called into work for an emergency meeting. He vaguely overheard a few things about the War God Tribe and Nisode City. He thought for a long time. His businesses in Nisode City were already flourishing. He also heard that his father had recently acquired more than 10 gaming organizations. It appeared the War God Tribe was finally about to make its debut in Conviction, which also meant it was time for him to lay out all his cards.

Nie Yan would make sure the War God Tribe would never decline like it did in the previous timeline!

Nie Yan drove to the company. His father had recently bought him a sports car. It was maroon with a sleek design. He finally had his own car! Although he didn't care about the brand, it was apparently a Sorong which was known to be expensive.

The company wasn't that far from home, only about a 10 minute drive away. Because he lived in the suburbs, there was a lot of greenery. Both sides of the road were shaded by trees.

A modern white building came into Nie Yan's view. It looked recently constructed. This was the office building his father had bought.

When Nie Yan walked through the doors, he saw many people busily at work. They all wore the same uniform. Everything appeared neat and orderly.

Nie Yan relied on the memories of his past life to navigate through this building.

Nie Yan was deeply moved when he spotted a familiar face walking over to him. This man was tall and robust, and from his muscular and tone body, it was evident he worked out regularly. Although he couldn't be considered handsome, he exuded a type of stalwart and courageous charm. He should only be about 27 years

old right now.

He was Nie Yan's cousin. All his relatives called him Ah Chen. Nie Yan and him used to play together back when they were still children. When Nie Yan's parents went to the border for their smuggling venture, they had brought Ah Chen along with them. As such, he was fairly intimate with the entire Nie household.

Because Ah Chen was busy helping Father Nie handling company affairs, this was Nie Yan's first time seeing him since returning to the past.

Ah Chen's eyes also flashed with emotion, and he quickly walked over to Nie Yan.

"Little Rascal! You've grown! I almost didn't recognize you." Ah Chen patted Nie Yan's shoulders and laughed. "You've been working out! Your parents recently told me you're pretty strong now, and could even win against your Uncle Lin! But I didn't believe them. Who knew they were actually telling the truth!"

Ah Chen suddenly threw out a punch without warning.

Nie Yan caught the fist with a loud smack. Ah Chen revealed an expression of surprise when he realized he couldn't struggle free. "Not bad. We should go for a round next time!"

Ah Chen was only playing a joke. He never expected Nie Yan to possess such strength. This ignited his fighting spirit.

Nie Yan rolled his eyes. This fellow was a fighting maniac. He would look for someone to spar a couple rounds with every day; otherwise, he wouldn't be able to stay still. However, Ah Chen was an extremely kind and loyal person. In the previous timeline, when he discovered what Uncle Luo Ming and those relatives did, he beat them half to death and ended up going to prison for it.

Back then, Nie Yan would visit Ah Chen regularly. When Nie Yan saw him, his condition had already deteriorated greatly. He was as frail as a matchstick. But whenever he saw Nie Yan, he would

reveal a big smile and laugh heartily. Seeing this pained Nie Yan deeply.

After seeing Ah Chen again, Nie Yan's nose grew sour, and he almost burst out in hot tears.

Nie Yan took a deep breath to calm his heart. "Where are my parents?" He asked with a faint smile.

"They're in the boardroom. Follow me," Ah Chen replied. Needless to say, it wasn't a place that could be freely entered. But he didn't care.

Nie Yan followed behind Ah Chen, passing by all sorts of security equipment along the way before entering the boardroom.

The boardroom was filled with around 40 people, all of whom were higher-ups in the company or the owners of gaming organizations.

Nie Yan swept his eyes over the boardroom. His gaze locked onto five people. They were big shots in the domestic gaming scene.

Sitting to the far left at the front was a 25-year-old man. He was dressed in a casual attire. He was the owner of Icewind, Frozen Prose. Icewind was the rank fifth gaming organization in the country.

Next to Frozen Prose sat a square-faced man in his 40s. He was the owner of Azure Dragon, the rank ninth gaming organization in the country.

There were also the owners of Thunder God, Nightmoon, and Blaze. All these gaming organizations were ranked within the top 30 in the country.

To get the owners of so many large gaming organizations in the same room wasn't something that could be achieved with money alone. It also required connections. Father Nie's contacts were definitely solid for him to make a business out of reselling metal.

Just what kind of gargantuan effort did it take to gather all these famous figures inside the game together?

For the War God Tribe to be able to threaten Victorious Return's position in the previous timeline definitely wasn't without reason.

But when Nie Yan saw these people, his gaze contained a hint of arrogance. This was because he was Mad Rogue Nirvana Flame!

Chapter 318 – Gathering Funds

A young female presenter was currently up on stage detailing the War God Tribe's development plans to the people from the gaming organizations. Nie Yan's parents and Uncle Lin sat far off in a corner listening as well. The War God Tribe's development was important. Right now, Nisode City was the Tuoba Family's domain with three guilds under their banner. For the War God Tribe to rise to prominence here would prove difficult. Father Nie had laid out the groundwork, investing a vast sum in preparation for the guild's establishment.

The War God Tribe was gathering strength and waiting for the opportune moment to strike!

The only thing they lacked right now was gold. Their only source was a single auction house, and the rest would have to be bought through the Credit Exchange. But purchasing gold was unreliable, and supply could be cut off at a moment's notice by a third party.

The only solution was to capture a few strongholds the moment they could. When the strongholds were developed, only then would the War God Tribe have a reliable source of gold.

Father Nie was at his wit's end trying to amass gold, but none of his ideas were feasible.

The War God Tribe had just recently been established. They had gathered numerous experts, and their popularity was flourishing. They absolutely couldn't end up dead in the water!

Conviction had long since stopped being a simple game as it had become an important place for relaxation and leisure. People spent nearly half of their lives in the virtual world. It was obvious what kind of economic effect this produced.

Conviction had already become a money-making tool for many people. For the War God Tribe to get a piece of the pie this late in

was an uphill battle.

Ah Chen brought Nie Yan to where his parents were. Many higher-ups were seated next to them.

“Why are you here? This is a boardroom meeting. If you need something, it can wait,” Father Nie said in a strict tone. But when he glanced at Nie Yan, there wasn’t a hint of anger in his expression. This was simply how he behaved in front of his son.

“I just came to take a look,” Nie Yan replied, then took a seat beside his parents. He wasn’t as afraid of his father compared to his past life.

“It’s fine. Little Yan can listen to this meeting.” Mother Nie gently smiled at her husband.

Ah Chen gave Nie Yan a wink.

Father Nie didn’t reply. He wasn’t at all opposed to Nie Yan joining the meeting. Everyone continued listening to the female presenter.

“... Although the War God Tribe has recently attracted some unwanted attention from the Tuoba Family’s three guilds, it’s just a minor bump. After all, we still don’t have any strongholds. During the initial protective period, the Tuoba Family can’t do anything to us. Our main goal for the future is the guild’s growth. We need to seize a stronghold as soon as possible. Furthermore...” The female presenter turned to look at Father Nie way off in the corner.

Father Nie nodded.

With Father Nie’s approval, she continued, “The guild gravely lacks funds. We hope that everyone present can provide a channel to purchase gold, which will be used to fund our future wars. We will offer a fair price.”

The owners of the gaming organizations sunk into heated discussion. A single question surfaced in their minds. If the War

God Tribe couldn't even collect gold, how would it grow? Gathering all these large gaming organizations together was a good idea no doubt. But even the best housewife couldn't cook without rice. Without a reliable source of gold, would the War God Tribe really have a future to speak of?

"What the hell do we do without any gold? Why even bother establishing a guild?"

"This is ridiculous..."

"What a waste of time."

...

Father Nie knitted his brows and revealed a somewhat unhappy expression at these comments. He had huge plans for the War God Tribe; otherwise, he wouldn't have invested so much resources into Conviction. However, the lack of gold really was a big problem.

There were boundless business opportunities in Conviction. Everyone wanted a share of the pie. Father Nie was no exception, only that his connections inside the game couldn't compare to the financial groups with deep foundations. He still hadn't found a reliable channel to purchase gold. The services of several groups he had previously contacted were already bought by other financial groups. Those gold farming groups would only consider selling to the War God Tribe if they offered 20% above the market rate.

"I can probably help the War God Tribe with its gold problem," Nie Yan suddenly said to his father and everyone else in earshot. He decided to no longer conceal things.

Mother Nie, Father Nie, Ah Chen, Lin Ya, and the others shifted their focus to Nie Yan, expressions of confusion and bewilderment in their eyes.

Although Nie Yan's parents knew he played Conviction, they didn't even know his ingame name, let alone the fact that he was

the guild leader of Asskickers United.

“The War God Tribe’s problem can’t be solved with just a few gold.” Father Nie waved his hand, cutting Nie Yan off. In his opinion, his son was just an ordinary player at best. For him to take out a few gold would already be impressive. But the development of the War God Tribe required tens of thousands of gold. Not to mention they still had to organize their troops to attack the Tuoba Family’s strongholds, which would eat away even more at their finances. There was no way Nie Yan could possibly resolve their problems.

“I can give you 60,000 gold right now and continue providing around 30,000 gold every week,” Nie Yan said.

Nie Yan’s words immediately caused an uproar.

“Little Yan, this is a boardroom meeting. You can’t play jokes like this,” Lin Ya gently reminded.

They had poured vast sums of money into Conviction without any luck. Yet Nie Yan suddenly informed them he had such immense wealth? It was no wonder no one believed him!

“I’m not joking around. Ah Chen can withdraw the gold when he gets online later today,” Nie Yan earnestly replied.

Nie Yan didn’t look like he was joking. Even though it was hard to imagine, Father Nie and the others who knew him decided to believe him. Nie Yan wasn’t the type of person to lie.

Father Nie gazed at Nie Yan in shock. Ever since returning home, his son had been full of surprises.

Just how did Nie Yan come about so much gold? A person could live the rest of their days in leisure if they sold 60,000 gold to the large financial groups!

Father Nie gave Nie Yan a meaningful gaze. Just what was his son doing every day in the game?

Both doubt and shock could be found on the faces of the higher-ups seated beside Father Nie. Did Nie Yan really have so much gold? This amount was more than enough to acquire an established guild.

“Ah Chen, go fetch Little Yan’s gold in the game,” Father Nie said. Although he was suspicious of where Nie Yan acquired so much gold, he still decided to put his trust in his son.

“No problem. Little Yan, what’s your name in the game so that I can get in touch with you?” Ah Chen casually asked.

“It’s Nirvana Flame,” Nie Yan replied. After which everyone looked at him in complete shock and disbelief.

The atmosphere turned dead silent, to the extent you could even hear a pin drop.

Just what was the significance behind the two words Nirvana Flame? It was the name of a godly player in Conviction, whose videos were plastered at the top of every large video sharing site and whose achievements garnered the reverence of all players! He was a legend that surfaced during the battle in Kiln Fire Woods!

“N-n-nirvana Flame... the guild leader of Asskickers United?” Ah Chen asked, his throat somewhat parched.

“Yes.” Nie Yan nodded. He had long since predicted this reaction. After all, the reputation of Nirvana Flame was simply too shocking. Since they would find out sooner or later, rather than keeping it hidden, it was better to reveal it now. Like this, he could help out the War God Tribe conquer Nisode City.

Father Nie was stunned for a moment before coming out of his daze. He glanced at Nie Yan, then turned back to the front of the boardroom, “Someone should have Little Su come down from the stage. It seems we’ll have to revise our development plans. We’ll have Little Yan and Ah Chen come up with a proposal, which we’ll look over before approving.”

“Good rascal! You sure are amazing! Do you know how many people would have a heart attack if it was spread that you’re Nirvana Flame?” Ah Chen happily patted Nie Yan’s shoulders. Nirvana Flame didn’t just represent a single person but also the entirety of Asskickers United. His position as their guild leader was one of the most revered in the game. With but a single order, he could have their more than 60,000 elites sweep away everything before him. Not to mention he could also rally hundreds of thousands of players from Sapphire Shrine and Holy Empire to his cause.

Just what kind of backing did Asskickers United have to reach its current dominance? This was a question many people had in their minds.

Players would definitely find it hard to believe that the guild leader of Asskickers United, Nirvana Flame, was still just a student in high school. It was difficult to connect the two together.

When everyone regained their senses, the higher-ups seated near Father Nie rushed over to Nie Yan and asked him how he raised Asskickers United to such heights. He was assailed with questions. But when they learned Asskickers United had arisen from the musings of him and a couple of his schoolmates, they all looked at each other in dismay. How many people had gone through painstaking efforts to establish a guild, pouring in countless hours and resources, only for it all to go to waste? Yet Nie Yan and a few former classmates in middle school had turned Asskickers United into an unrivalled existence in Calore! This was truly hard to believe.

Nie Yan and Ah Chen consulted for a bit and drew up a development plan for the War God Tribe. Asskickers United would provide support where they could. All that was left was for Father Nie to look over it.

“Little Yan, tell me. How many properties do you own in Conviction?” Ah Chen asked. He was quite curious. Even if Nie Yan

was the guild leader of Asskickers United, there was no way he could bring out so much gold. After all, strongholds hadn't yet begun making a profit. The only answer was that the gold was coming from elsewhere!

Nie Yan thought for a moment. Since they were family, there was no harm in letting Ah Chen know. "I have 6 auction houses, over 30 shops, and 50 plots of land." As for the Union of Assassins and the Super Trade Channel, those didn't count as properties.

Ah Chen's eyes widened like saucers plates, only recovering from his shock after a long time. "Holy crap, that many!?" They had spent a fortune just to acquire a single auction house and a few shops and plots of land. But Nie Yan actually had acquired far more by himself. This was simply too shocking!

Chapter 319 - Laying Cards Out on the Table

Father Nie had been eavesdropping on Nie Yan and Ah Chen's conversation while pretending to be busily chatting with the people around him. His hand which was holding his teacup trembled, unable to conceal the shock in his heart. 6 auction houses, over 30 shops, and 50 plots of land, he never thought Nie Yan would own so many properties. Just how high was their total valuation? None of the people present could give an estimate.

The War God Tribe had exhausted all their connections and paid a sky-high price just to acquire a single auction house in Nisode City. Father Nie understood just how difficult it was to obtain an auction house in Conviction. Even plots of land and shops were listed up in the Credit Exchange for sums scarce few people could afford.

Father Nie gazed at Nie Yan with an expression of pride and gratification.

The people seated near Father Nie were his trusted confidantes. As for who was trustworthy and who was not, Nie Yan who had returned to the past could tell at a glance. Fortunately, Luo Ming and those relatives were booted to the curb. Otherwise, he wouldn't so casually reveal his identity as Mad Rogue Nirvana Flame. Just what kind of consequences would there be if this information was leaked to the outside? He didn't dare to imagine.

The people close to Father Nie were all trustworthy.

Nie Yan looked around. His mother, Lin Ya, and the others were still recovering from their shock. None of them could have imagined he would have such achievements in Conviction!

"None of you are to reveal Little Yan's identity inside Conviction or anything related to him to the outside. Otherwise, I'm sure you're all aware of the consequences," Father Nie declared in an imposing tone after sweeping his eyes over his employees. Drastic

measures had to be taken to ensure the confidentiality of this piece of explosive knowledge.

“Yes, Chairman!” everyone agreed in unison.

None of them dared to oppose Father Nie. Just like in the previous timeline, his word was absolute law in the company.

“Tell us. How much gold do your auction houses bring in every day? It’ll better help us draw up a development plan for the War God Tribe if we know.” Ah Chen nudged Nie Yan with his elbow.

Not just Ah Chen, but everyone wanted to know the answer. As more of Nie Yan’s foundation came to light, it became increasingly difficult to suppress the shock within their hearts.

Nie Yan had already become the focal point of attention. Everyone was eagerly awaiting his answer. The earlier heavy atmosphere had lightened considerably.

Everyone was previously anxious about the War God Tribe’s future. If they couldn’t find a reliable source of gold, they would have no choice but to continue hemorrhaging funds to purchase some at a marked up rate. Not to mention they were all alone. Whether or not they could truly rise up and sweep away the competition in Nisode City still remained to be seen.

This was a huge risk! If the company suffered a crushing setback while expanding their virtual business, all the money they invested would go down the drain!

But now, it felt as though a weight had been lifted from their shoulders. With Nie Yan’s support, what did the War God Tribe have to fear? Conquering Nisode City would no longer be a problem. Their rise to glory was imminent!

In the previous timeline, the War God Tribe had still risen to prominence thanks to the perseverance of Father Nie. It was only after they encountered Victorious Return later on that they suffered a series of crushing setbacks. Nie Yan’s actions had

changed history. With the threat of Victorious Return neutralized, the War God Tribe would have even brighter prospects!

Looking at the crowd's anticipation-filled gazes, then back at his parents, Nie Yan straightened his posture.

“Three of the six auction houses I own are located in Calore. They are the Central Auction House, the Mercenary Auction House, and the Northern Auction House. The other three are the Zeran Auction House, the Waker Auction House, and the Westbell Auction House in Nisode City. As for my shops, you might have heard of my famous one since it recently gained a bit of attention. It's called the Starry Night Potion Shop. We've opened many branches across the Viridian Empire. My other shops like the Crafting Material Shop and Tinkerer Shop have yet to expand to such a scale. But we aren't lacking talent, so I expect them to develop smoothly as well...” Nie Yan listed off all his businesses in Conviction.

The more everyone listened, the more fearful they became. Of the auction houses mentioned, which one wasn't eyed like a thick slab of meat by countless financial groups? Their value several years down the line would be incalculable! All of these golden geese had surprisingly been snatched away by Nie Yan. He controlled more than 60% of the assets in Calore and Nisode City! This sort of capital was enough to throw down with even the largest of heavyweights. Additionally, he tried to downplay the fact that he was the owner of the Starry Night Potion Shop. However, its current growth was nothing short of astonishing! There were no less than several dozen branches opened across every major city, all of which were in prime real estate locations. What's more, they were still feverishly recruiting! Waves of Alchemists flocked to join under the banner of the Starry Night Potion Shop. No one would be surprised if it became the largest potion shop chain in the entire Viridian Empire! It was extremely valuable just by itself!

For a single person to be behind all these things, it was simply too

frightening!

“With Little Yan here, the War God Tribe can expand worry-free.” Lin Ya smiled. His old comrade’s son had grown up. He also felt gratified.

Nie Yan glanced at the people by his father’s side. They no longer dared to regard him as as a useless brat. They had met him several times in the past. But since he appeared quite ordinary, they had somewhat looked down on him. The only thing they feared about him was his identity as the chairman’s son. But now, they looked at him in a new light. Everything he achieved in Conviction was gained through hard work alone! Nothing was given to him by his parents. Without any real ability, it was impossible to establish powerhouses like Asskickers United and the Starry Night Potion Shop, let alone snatch away so many auction houses and plots of land right under the noses of countless financial groups.

“A tiger father will not beget a dog son. Who knew the chairman’s son was so amazing?”

“Right? I wish my son was even half as capable.”

Father Nie was filled with satisfaction after hearing the numerous compliments aimed at his son.

Nie Yan had never gotten the respect of these people in the previous timeline. They had mocked him countless times for his incompetence and mediocrity. From this day forward, he would no longer be seen as a wastrel!

Seeing the reverence in the eyes of these people, Nie Yan sighed with emotion. A person required ability to be acknowledged. And nothing could better convince them than his reputation as Mad Rogue Nirvana Flame!

Nie Yan held his head up high, his heart brimming with pride. All of Conviction was his stage!

“I’d also like to mention Asskickers United previously received

an investment from the Dragonsoar Financial Group in exchange for 30% of our shares. However, I still hold absolute leadership in the guild. As for our strength, I don't think I need to speak on it. Furthermore, I control a majority stake in both Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine. So if the War God Tribe requires it, I can mobilize the strength of all three guilds," Nie Yan said. These three guilds could clear away all the obstacles in the War God Tribe's path!

Nie Yan dropped another huge bomb, causing everyone to feel light-headed. Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine were also famous guilds. Although they were overshadowed by the brilliance of Asskickers United, they were still untouchable existences in the minds of players! But it suddenly came to light that these guilds actually fell under his control? This information was too shocking!

Calore, the capital of the Viridian Empire, was Nie Yan's domain. It was a place where he could call the clouds, summon the rain, and blot out the sky with a wave of his hand!

Who in Calore could possibly oppose Nie Yan?

Heaven Breaker? Nightbreak Trickster? All of them were beaten into retreat!

Calore was Nie Yan's backyard!

Father Nie and company were still digesting the information. It took them a long while to recover from their shock.

"Aside from these three guilds, I also control a professional player organization called the Union of Assassins, which currently has over 30,000 members. Although it isn't the same as a guild, they can still play a big role in the future if we mobilize them. That's everything."

Everyone had already grown somewhat numb to the shock. But when Nie Yan informed them that the Union of Assassins also belonged to him, they were left reeling yet again.

This kind of strength was probably unrivalled in the entire

Viridian Empire!

Everyone spiritedly discussed the matters Nie Yan revealed. It was hard to contain the excitement in their hearts. The future of the company looked brighter than ever. Their foray into the virtual reality business was guaranteed to be a success!

“From now on, Nie Yan will also be involved in the company's affairs. When I'm absent, he can speak on my behalf. His position is equal to mine!” Father Nie announced. His words were undoubtedly a show of acknowledgement. No matter how much money they earned, it was all for their son's sake anyway. Since Nie Yan had shown such ability, he could feel at ease handing everything over.

With Father Nie's words, Nie Yan's status in the company instantly soared to the top!

Father Nie's words held enormous weight. As soon as he made the announcement, everyone looked at Nie Yan with hints of flattery. In the future, the company would definitely be handed over to him. A single thought surfaced in their minds. If they wanted to continue working here, it was crucial to get into his good books!

Nie Yan was also taken aback. After thinking for a bit, he understood that his father was using this as a way for him to gain experience. His heart was moved. His father had never shown him this much approval in the previous timeline.

Chapter 320 – Surrender

Nie Yan revealed almost all of his assets, allowing everyone to feel a burst of reassurance. The future of the War God Tribe was no longer filled with uncertainties.

The female staff member named Little Su was still explaining the War God Tribe's development plan. The people from the big gaming organizations below the stage, unaware of the Nie Yan's big reveal, were starting to kick up a ruckus.

"What the fuck are we supposed to do without gold? What a waste of time! Everyone, let's go," a bald man in his 30s jeered.

"Right! How do you expect to develop a guild without gold!?"

One person after another expressed their dissatisfaction.

"A large company like this can't even come up with 50,000 gold? What a joke," a professional player in his 20s sneered.

The crowd started raising their voices. The heads of the five large gaming organizations didn't speak up, but they shared the same concerns. They wanted to see how the company's higher-ups would solve this problem.

Nie Yan's gaze locked onto the five at the front. Just what are they discussing? He feared these fellows didn't have the War God Tribe's best interests at heart. The only thing keeping them here was the generous salary offer.

"Please, calm down." Little Su clearly lacked experience as she struggled to quell the crowd. She was on the verge of bursting out in tears. So when she saw Father Nie signalling for her to come down, she breathed out a sigh of relief. "Sorry, everyone. We'll address your concerns after a short break."

Little Su quickly got off the stage as the crowd's heckling grew even louder. Things were starting to go off kilter.

“Chairman.” Little Su bowed to Father Nie.

Father Nie nodded. “We’ve come up with a new development proposal. The previous one will be scrapped. Here, have a look.”

“Let me go up,” Nie Yan interrupted. Little Su lacked the necessary experience. Where she would probably fail to handle this matter adequately, he could succeed with ease. After all, it was his proposal. And having dealt with much bigger situations before, he felt confident in shutting down these troublemakers.

Nie Yan walked up to the front of the podium and swept his gaze over the crowd.

Following this, the people below revealed expressions of disdain.

“Don’t tell me you guys are short on staff too? You’re actually having a brat go up?” a professional player mocked.

The heads of Icewind, Azure Dragon, Thunder God, Nightmoon, and Blaze remained silent.

“What are they planning?” Azure Dragon’s owner lowered his head and asked.

“Who knows. Let’s keep watching,” Frozen Prose replied. Their real names had long since taken a backseat to their ingame aliases.

They couldn’t for the life of them understand why Nie Yan had got up on stage. He only appeared to be around 18 years old, his face containing hints of immaturity.

Nie Yan’s cold gaze swept over the audience.

“You, you, and you are all dismissed!” Nie Yan pointed at the troublemakers. He didn’t know if these fellows came here with malicious intent. But regardless, they couldn’t be allowed to stay.

“And who the hell are you supposed to be? Tell the person in charge to come out!” one of the troublemakers shouted in indignation.

At this moment, Father Nie stood up and said in a cold tone, “He

is my son. His words represent mine.”

Since the chairman had spoken, the crowd had nothing to say. Some of the troublemakers kicked up an even bigger fuss but were still escorted out by security, kicking and screaming.

Nie Yan understood these people were most likely members from the large gaming organizations who wanted to put pressure on the War God Tribe.

After the troublemakers were given the boot, the audience finally settled down.

“The War God Tribe was just recently established and still has barely gotten off the ground. This much is true. Those of you who wish to leave, please do. We won’t bar your way! We don’t need troublemakers here. The door is right over there!” Nie Yan swept his gaze over the audience, briefly pausing on the five heads of the large gaming organizations.

The head of Thunder God stood up. He was a man in his early 30s. Dressed in a black blazer, he was tall and had sharp eyes with thick brows. His name was Zhang Song, a famous figure in the professional gaming circle. He was an Elementalist called Mad Thunder Blaze, and he was nicknamed Thunder God by the players. He had over 600 players in his gaming organization, all of whom were powerful experts. Beyond this, he was most well-known for his arrogance and explosive temper.

The War God Tribe had originally spent a great deal of effort to invite this fellow over, promising him all sorts of benefits. His arrogance created countless difficulties for the higher-ups. But for the sake of the guild’s development, they acquiesced to his every demand.

Players naturally flocked to strong guilds, whereas weak guilds would have to beg players to join.

“You snot-nosed brat. Your so-called War God Tribe can’t even

do something as simple as gathering gold, lagging behind before you're even out the gates. I'm declaring this now. If the War God Tribe becomes successful, I'll eat my own words," Zhang Song sneered. He turned to the heads of the other gaming organizations. "My apologies, everyone. I'll be taking my leave."

In the previous timeline, the War God Tribe was always deferential for the sake of their growth. No longer would this be the case! Those who lorded it all over the place would be booted without question! These types of people had egos that soared to the high heavens. If they weren't quickly brought down a peg, they would be impossible to control in the future!

Nie Yan coldly laughed. "Trust me, that day will come, and it will arrive much sooner than you think. Not long from now, Nisode City will belong to the War God Tribe! By then, even if you fall to your knees and beg, you won't be welcome!"

Zhang Song coldly harrumphed, then turned around and left. A dozen or so people in the audience also stood up and followed him out. Presumably, they were members of Thunder God.

Things settled down considerably after Zhang Song and his lackeys left the room. The heads of the other gaming organizations remained in their seats. They weren't as bull-headed as Zhang Song. Each of them was offered a generous salary for joining the War God Tribe. Why would they unnecessarily throw something like that away?

If it were the past, the higher-ups would definitely be panicking at the sight of Zhang Song bringing his people away. The War God Tribe was lacking gold, so all they could do was offer higher salaries and think of any means possible to get these people to stay. All else could wait. But now, the circumstances were different. They had the backing of Asskickers United. With a steady source of gold, they could raise incentives for joining. After which players would come flocking to their door. Headhunt a few powerful experts on top of that, and the War God Tribe would quickly grow

to become a powerful guild.

With the crowd finally quiet, Nie Yan looked around at everyone. “Now, I think everyone still here should be planning to stay and help develop the War God Tribe. As long as you have the guild’s back, we’ll have yours. I’m sure you’ve already discussed the issue of salary, so I’ll just focus on the guild’s development.”

When he mentioned the word development, the few remaining whispered conversations died down as everyone’s attention locked onto Nie Yan. If the situation was still as dire as Little Su had described, with the guild bottlenecked by a lack of gold, they would be pretty disgruntled. If the War God Tribe didn’t have enough ingame currency, and couldn’t even provide their elites with the most basic requirement of mounts, what development was there to speak of?

“Regarding the development of the War God Tribe, we’ll be providing an initial investment of 60,000 gold to outfit everyone with mounts, followed by a weekly injection of 30,000 gold. Furthermore, we’ll be allying with Asskickers United over in Calore. Each and every one of you will also receive a 5% discount when purchasing items at any branch of the Starry Night Potion Shop. The War God Tribe is currently recruiting many gaming organizations. I predict we’ll have 10 to 20 more top ranked gaming organizations in the country joining us a little further down the line. Our current goal is to capture two or three strongholds from the guilds under the Tuoba Family’s control within a week,” Nie Yan announced. He appeared cool, confident, and at ease while speaking on the podium.

After hearing his words, everyone in the audience, including Icewind and the other large gaming organization heads, were in shock. The War God Tribe was actually so filthy rich, directly investing 60,000 gold and an additional 30,000 gold every week on top of that? This was unthinkable. Except for a handful of the most wealthy consortiums, no one could gather so much gold! The War

God Tribe had found a secure channel to acquire gold? This was a major surprise, but even though they had some doubts in their hearts, they knew that there was no reason for such a wealthy company to lie to them. Having already spent so much money, ruining their reputation would only bring unnecessary harm.

With so much funding, not to mention after recruiting so many gaming organizations, it would be a joke to think the War God Tribe would fail! Zhang Song would definitely regret the words he spoke today!

The previously contempt and uninterested expressions in their eyes disappeared. They were now seriously listening to Nie Yan. To gather so much gold in such a short amount of time, this person's connections were definitely shocking. This wasn't something that could be bought with money! The War God Tribe had just been established, but it had already formed an alliance with the mighty Asskickers United, not to mention receiving a deal from the owner of the Starry Night Potion Shop. These were all major powerhouses! They couldn't help but wonder what sort of background this company possessed.

No one had the nerve to cause any more trouble. Thinking back to what just happened a moment ago, everyone broke into a cold sweat. Which large financial group or company didn't possess powerful influences behind the scenes? If they had really kicked up a ruckus a minute ago, that would've been like courting death!

Nie Yan didn't overlook anything while explaining the War God Tribe's development plan. He calmly swept his gaze over the audience as if he were a god high atop the clouds looking down on the world. Then again, considering his status in Conviction, he was genuinely qualified to look down on these people!

Chapter 321 – Daze

It was rumoured that this company ran a metal business, smuggling ores into the country with the military's backing. The heads of the gaming organizations originally didn't pay much attention to these rumours. But thinking about it now, their minds descended into shock.

They looked up at Nie Yan, their expressions completely different. Their gazes were now full of resolve.

After Nie Yan got off the stage, Little Su stepped in to replace him. She began explaining the finer details of the War God Tribe's development plan. The audience was much more receptive to her words compared to before.

"I didn't know you were such a charismatic speaker!" Ah Chen teased when Nie Yan returned.

Nie Yan faked a laugh, but inwardly thought, after so many years of experience, how could something as insignificant as this rattle me?

Father Nie faintly nodded. Nie Yan's performance had thoroughly satisfied him. My son has grown up. He continued to chat with the group for a while before something occurred to him. "Wait, son, doesn't the Tuoba Family own the Nisode auction houses you mentioned?" Father Nie asked.

Nie Yan began explaining how he acquired the auction houses as well as the Tuoba Family's internal turmoil. All signs pointed toward Tuoba Time preparing to take action against Tuoba Hongye!

Father Nie thought of something. He looked toward the back of the crowd and ordered, "Little Li, give me an updated report on the Tuoba Family's situation."

"The Tuoba Family controls a total of seven companies. They've

recently encountered some financial problems due to the Century Financial Group attempting a hostile takeover of two of their companies. Tuoba Hongye and Tuoba Fengyuan are currently scrambling to stop this by dumping shares into their less important companies and liquidating their assets...”

With the Tuoba Family and Century Financial Group going at each other so fiercely, there were definitely sharks circling around, smelling the stench of blood.

“It’s a good opportunity.” Father Nie’s eyes lit up. With Nie Yan settling the War God Tribe’s gold problems, they had a huge surplus of real world capital to invest. Why not take this opportunity to fish in troubled waters? Who knew what kind of benefits they could reap from this struggle between two large financial groups, especially if they played their cards right!

While Father Nie went to arrange these things, Nie Yan remained to delegate some of the War God Tribe’s more pressing matters.

When everything was settled, the day was almost over. It appeared Nie Yan had unwittingly played hooky all day. However, it couldn’t be helped. He drove home. After dinner, he would log back into Conviction.

...

Huahai High School.

The day had passed in the blink of an eye. As the sun set, the final rays of orange light shone through the classroom windows.

Xie Yao sat in her seat, staring at the empty desk beside her. Every time she noticed the void where he should be, she felt a sense of loss. When she logged off, she had been quite annoyed with him. However, when he didn’t show up at school, the annoyance in her heart slowly faded away, leaving behind only emptiness.

Xie Yao absent-mindedly glanced out the window.

“Xie Yao, school’s over. Let’s go.” Xia Ling walked over.

“Hmm? Oh, alright. Let me pack my things.” Xie Yao snapped out of her daze and began tidying up her desk.

Xia Ling looked at Xie Yao with a teasing smile on her face. “Nie Yan didn’t come today?”

“Yeah.” Xie Yao nodded.

“That’s too bad. He usually walks you to your car at the end of the day,” Xia Ling quipped.

Xie Yao took one last glance at Nie Yan’s computer, her emotions in turmoil. “Let’s go.”

Seeing Xie Yao’s moody expression, Xia Ling quickly changed the subject.

At this time, a young man in a white tracksuit walked over to the two girls. It was Liu Rui. The bruises on his face were already healed, and he appeared quite dashing.

“Oh my! Liu Rui, you’re back? How’s your face? Nothing wrong, right?” Xia Ling feigned pleasant surprise, her voice carrying a noticeable hint of sarcasm. Truthfully, she couldn’t stand the guy. She used to think he was alright. But with Nie Yan’s appearance, his shortcomings became all the more apparent. He was far too arrogant, his ego bruised over the smallest of things. Even though Nie Yan was far from being flawless, he was much more pleasing to the eye.

“I’m doing fine. Yao Yao¹, it’s been too long!” Liu Rui hid his embarrassment and greeted Xie Yao.

“Mhm.” Xie Yao nodded. She wore an indifferent expression.

“Are you still playing Conviction? How strong are you now? I’ve recently hit Level 42 and outfitted myself with a full set of Gold-grade equipment,” Liu Rui proudly announced. “I’ll take you levelling with me in Grand Drum Gill. it’s a Level 45 map! But

don't worry, I've convinced some of my brothers in Victorious Return to take us. We'll level up really fast!" he said enthusiastically. He hadn't seen Xie Yao in Conviction in a long time, so he had no idea what her current level was.

"Pfft!" Xia Ling involuntarily giggled. Liu Rui really was a frog living at the bottom of a well. Xie Yao was currently Level 47, and she was decked out in top quality Level 45 Gold-grade equipment, with even a few pieces of Dark Gold-grade equipment mixed in.

Liu Rui furrowed his brows, rather displeased by Xia Ling's response. However, Xie Yao was right there, and the girls were close friends, so he wisely kept his mouth shut.

"Don't mind me. I'm just thinking of something else." Xia Ling waved her hand while stifling her laughter.

"Sure, I'll tag along. But can I invite a friend?" Xie Yao replied after suddenly having a mischievous idea. It was about time Nie Yan got out of the Crystal Caverns. She wondered just what kind of reaction Liu Rui would have when he met Nie Yan's character inside the game. Stupefied? Scared silly?

"Is your friend a guy or a girl? If it's a girl, my brothers will certainly welcome her," Liu Rui joked with what he thought was a bright and sunny smile.

"Sorry, I'll have to disappoint them. It's a guy," Xie Yao replied insipidly.

Liu Rui's smile froze on his face, but he forced a new one on in a pretentious show of generosity. "That's also fine. What level is this guy?"

"I think he's Level 30 something."

"Oh? That's a bit low. I don't know if my brothers will be willing to take him. But don't worry, it should be fine if I talk to them." Liu Rui patted his chest.

"Then we'll have to trouble you. Where should we meet up?" Xie

Yao asked, mentally rubbing her hands and cackling maniacally. Someone actually wanted to help powerlevel Nirvana Flame? And even thought his level was too low for their standards? Ha!

“Let’s meet 30 minutes after the server opens. How about Calore’s east entrance?” Liu Rui suggested.

Xia Ling was inwardly dying from laughter to the side. Xie Yao was simply too mean! She was normally gentle and refined. But she was perfectly capable of concocting up some devious schemes.

“Xie Yao, let me send you off.” Liu Rui glanced at Xia Ling. He wanted to get rid of this unwanted third wheel and spend some quality time with Xie Yao.

“It’s more exciting if everyone goes together.” Xie Yao grabbed Xia Ling’s hand. “Xia Ling, let’s go!”

The two girls walked out the classroom, happily chatting away.

“Little Yue said she’s coming back to see us.”

“Really? When?”

“I don’t know. I heard she’s been very busy helping at her family’s company. She’s only able to come online every once in a while.”

Xie Yao and Xia Ling gossiped happily while Liu Rui quietly tagged behind. He was effectively turned into the third wheel. His expression was dark because his underlings had kept him updated on everything that happened in school, especially anything related to Xie Yao. She had been spending a lot of time alone with Nie Yan, and she was always smiling when they were together. It had caused a feeling of unease to sprout in his heart. He was intimidated by Nie Yan’s talent and ability. He only dared to show himself today because he heard Nie Yan was absent.

“I’m going home now,” Xie Yao bid farewell to Xia Ling as she got in her family car. She didn’t spare Liu Rui so much as a glance.

Liu Rui got the message of Xie Yao's cold shoulder loud and clear. Stupid bitch! You're nothing but a pretty face. What's there to be so arrogant about? He was more interested in her wealth than anything else. The world was full of beauties. He could easily pick them out as he pleased.

...

As Nie Yan drove home from his parents' company, Xie Yao's dial tone began playing on his phone.

He pressed the answer button, and Xie Yao's beautiful face showed up on screen. What made him almost veer off the road, however, was the fact that she was lying on a couch in a lacy pink nightgown. The tantalizing sleeveless outfit, decorated with cute polka-dots, revealed her jade-white arms all the way up to her alluring shoulders. Her pretty cheeks were dazzling, with a slightly shy blush that made her appear somewhat drunk. Xie Yao looked charmingly naive, her tight skirt and protruding chest exposing hints of white skin on both sides.

Nie Yan racked his brain, but couldn't fathom why Xie Yao would wear such a sexy outfit to video call him. Nevertheless, his eyes were immediately glued onto the screen and refused to look away.

Xie Yao looked at Nie Yan's face through the video screen, her pulse racing. Her face blazed as she felt his gaze roaming her body. A strange feeling arose in her heart, and she suddenly felt ashamed of the bold whimsy that led to this scene. Nie Yan had been gone for just a day, yet she already felt empty inside as if she were incomplete. She had no idea when she had become so reliant on Nie Yan.

Her parents had gone on vacation and wouldn't be back for months. Being home alone, her sense of loss had bred a fervent desire to call Nie Yan.

「Nie Yan, why didn't you come to school today?」She finally mustered up the courage to start a conversation.

「Something came up at my parents' company, so I went over to help out,」Nie Yan explained. Xie Yao's sincere concern made him feel incredibly touched. This was the first time he had felt so close to the goddess of his heart. This video call connected them to each other much deeper than ever before.

Looking at Xie Yao gave Nie Yan a feeling that an entire lifetime had passed since he'd seen her. Her sexy yet charming figure seemed too picturesque, almost like a porcelain doll. Nie Yan's affections from both lifetimes merged together, everlasting yet impossibly distant.

「Anything happen at school?」

「Not much. Liu Rui finally came back to school today. It seems he made a full recovery.」

Nie Yan's eyes glinted with a sharp light as he calculated how much time had passed. That kid should've recovered long ago, but he only returned the one day I'm not there? Hmph! Does he think people won't see through the coincidence?

1. This is not her IGN. Repeating a person's "first" name twice is used as a term of endearment in Chinese.

Chapter 322 – Placing Bounties

Nie Yan had instilled a deep sense of dread into Liu Rui during their spar. He didn't dare to show his face at school when Nie Yan was there.

As Nie Yan and Xie Yao chatted, the topic eventually drifted over to Conviction.

「Xie Yao, have you heard of Conviction?」Nie Yan asked.「We could play together some time.」It would be great if Xie Yao played Conviction. That way they could spend even more time together.

「Of course! But I'm busy with a quest right now. How about we play later?」Xie Yao really wanted to tell Nie Yan she was Yao Yao, but she still managed to keep her lips tightly sealed. She planned to delay the reveal for a little longer.

「Mhm... Just let me know when you want to meet up.」Nie Yan nodded.

「I need to go to the bathroom. Nie Yan, let's chat again some other time,」Xie Yao said. With Nie Yan's scorching hot gaze staring at her through the video screen, she could no longer endure that peculiar feeling in her heart.

「Alright.」

「Goodbye, Nie Yan.」

「Take care.」Nie Yan hung up the call with a hint of disappointment, wondering when he could see this seductive and bashful side of Xie Yao again.

Nie Yan realized his relationship with Xie Yao had progressed much further than it ever had in the previous timeline. Love couldn't be rushed. It had to be nurtured one step at a time. Didn't the fact that she was comfortable enough video calling him with such a risque appearance represent that he held a special place in her heart?

Xie Yao's appearance in her nightgown was just as alluring as her mature businesswoman self in the previous timeline, but with added hints of youthful immaturity. Her flushed red cheeks which didn't settle down even after a long time resembled an early morning rose, brimming with a captivating vitality.

Thinking to this point, Nie Yan's mind turned chaotic.

Nie Yan finished dinner and jumped back into Conviction. Everyone had already cleared their red names. They used their Return Scrolls and teleported to Glory City.

Nie Yan and the others emerging from the Glory City transfer area immediately stirred up waves of commotion. The conflict between Asskickers United and Bloodlust Blades had long since been publicized. Everyone knew they were forced to retreat into the Crystal Caverns after being chased by the forces of Bloodlust Blades. Who would've expected all of them to make it out alive? These players from Asskickers United were truly a godly bunch.

Nie Yan's group emerging from the Crystal Caverns without so much as a scratch was a fierce slap to the face of Bloodlust Blades. A group of players from a rival guild had run amok in their territory and still managed to escape safely. What face did Bloodlust Blades have left?

News of Nie Yan and the others' return immediately spread out like wildfire, mostly thanks to the efforts of the smaller guilds which were repeatedly stepped on by Bloodlust Blades. They posted a thread with a provocative title on the Glory City section of the forums:「Bloodlust Blades can't even guard their own territory! What right do they have to be called the top guild in Glory City?」

Of course they were only throwing a little bit of dirty water. None of them dared to actually oppose Bloodlust Blade which held an unshakeable position in Glory City.

Nie Yan and the others strolled around Glory City for a bit, just to rub it in the faces of Bloodlust Blades some more, before returning

to the transfer area and teleporting back to Calore.

After a while, Ah Chen contacted Nie Yan.

「Where are you?」Ah Chen asked.

「I'm near the entrance of the Calore Central Auction House,」Nie Yan replied. He first had to deliver the gold to Ah Chen.

Nie Yan patiently waited at the Central Auction House. It had become several times more spacious since he upgraded it to Tier 7. It appeared quite magnificent with walls constructed out of white stone, 30 meter tall pillars supporting the ceiling, and a long flight of steps which led from the entrance to the square below. A player looking at it would be filled with a sense of grandeur.

The Central Auction House was bustling with activity. Numerous players walked up and down the steps every minute.

This entire place is mine! Nie Yan couldn't help but swell up with pride. His achievements in this life were nothing short of extraordinary!

Before long, Ah Chen arrived at the coordinates Nie Yan gave him.

Nie Yan recognized Ah Chen at a glance. His IGN was still Don't Call Me Bro Chen like in the previous timeline.

Ah Chen stood in front of Nie Yan in a daze for what seemed like an eternity. Even though he knew the player before him was his cousin, he didn't dare to speak up because he still found all this hard to believe.

“I brought the 60,000 gold with me. Let me trade you,” Nie Yan finally spoke up after noticing Ah Chen fidgeting around nervously for the longest time.

Nie Yan sent a trade request.

“Holy crap! It really is you, kiddo! I was afraid I made a mistake!” Ah Chen patted Nie Yan's shoulder. He finally relaxed, returning

to his usual carefree self. Nie Yan was a legendary figure in Conviction, an existence that all players revered. To be cousins with such a person, he worried he was dreaming.

Nie Yan smiled. Now this is the Ah Chen I know!

Nie Yan put 60,000 gold into the trade window.

“60,000 gold, a 6 followed by four 0’s! This is my first time seeing so much gold!” Ah Chen exclaimed. The War God Tribe had never gathered so much gold at once despite pouring in a fortune. The few thousand gold they did manage to acquire every now and then would be instantly spent developing the guild.

The reason the War God Tribe’s development had stalled wasn’t that they lacked funding, but rather a channel to purchase gold. They couldn’t find any gold farming groups that hadn’t already sold their services to others. As for establishing their own, that was still a work-in-progress.

The establishment of a gold farming group was different from that of a guild. Generally, only wealthy financial groups could establish gold farming groups. The players that worked in them were usually poor, receiving a daily wage of 50 credits on average. They were provided replaceable equipment and ordered to farm low-level mobs every day. They made the rest of their money by selling the gold and equipment they collected to their employers at market rate.

Gold farmers generally picked melee classes since they required fewer consumables. At most, they might eat the cheapest loaf of bread to recover their health faster, allowing them to get back to the endless grind. This was the life of a gold farmer. It was monotonous and tedious, with little to no variation. But many people still chose to this kind of work to make a living.

In the previous timeline, the War God Tribe had tens of thousands of gold farmers working under them. It took Father Nie an exuberant amount of time and resources to establish this gold

farming group.

The War God Tribe would always be short on gold without their own gold farming group. Only after establishing one would they become self-sufficient. Nie Yan's aid was only a temporary solution to their problem.

"I'll send someone over to the auction house you own in Nisode City and have them connect it to the Super Trade Channel. You should see sales increase by quite a bit," Nie Yan said. Like this, the Super Trade Channel would comprise eight auction houses and enjoy a monopoly in both Calore and Nisode City!

Nie Yan confirmed the trade with Ah Chen.

"About the auction house, send that person over to talk to me. One more thing, do you have any equipment to spare? Our treasury is basically empty."

"No problem, I'll immediately send some over," Nie Yan said. He could probably spare around 30,000 pieces of equipment. Asskickers United's treasury was practically bursting at the seams. Taking out 30,000 pieces of equipment wouldn't be a problem. If he wanted to take out more, he would have to receive the permission of the Dragonsoar Financial Group.

"It seems things will be smooth sailing from now on," Ah Chen happily said. All the conditions were met. The War God Tribe's rise was imminent! Just as he finished speaking, he received a call from guild headquarters. "It seems like there's business for me to take care of. We're still a new guild, you know. I'll be taking my leave. Come visit us in Nisode City some time!"

"Alright." Nie Yan nodded.

Nie Yan ordered his subordinates to take care of some things related to the War God Tribe. Just at this moment, he received a piece of news from Guo Huai.

「Check the Calore section of the forums!」

He immediately opened the forums, where he found a post in the Calore boards that dampened his mood considerably.

Bloodlust Blades declares war on Asskickers United! You will be rewarded 2 gold for every member of Asskickers United killed.

Kill Count: 32

The kill count was rapidly rising.

A reward of 2 gold was already incredible, and that was just for killing an ordinary member. A top ranking member would give even more gold, with Nie Yan's bounty at the very top. He was worth over 5,000 gold!

After doing some calculations, if Bloodlust Blades wished to kill all 60,000 members of Asskickers United, they would have to spend roughly 200,000 gold! What lavish spending!

Aside from investing a bit of gold, Bloodlust Blades suffered no losses. This announcement was made on the Calore forum boards in any case. They could simply sit back, relax, and enjoy the show all the way from Glory City.

Seeing this announcement, Nie Yan boiled with anger. Asskickers United wouldn't take this lying down! For Bloodlust Blades to be willing to part with so much gold, who knew how much money the Century Financial Group had invested.

"Want to see who has deeper pockets? Let me show you!" Nie Yan snarled. He immediately thought of the Union of Assassins. It had currently developed to the point where they had over 30,000 professional players, including some of the best in the business.

Nie Yan wrote an announcement in the Union of Assassins.

You will be rewarded 2 gold for every member of Bloodlust Blades you kill. There is no upper limit.

This announcement was a golden opportunity for these professional players. It was the same reward, but the players of

Bloodlust Blades were much easier to deal with than those in Asskickers United. They would naturally pick the easier of the two.

Chapter 323 – Awed

Countless players applied to Asskickers United every day, but only a tiny fraction of them were accepted due to the stringent screening process. This was why Asskickers United had far fewer members than other major guilds. But what they lacked in numbers they made up for in quality. Every member of Asskickers United was an elite. So other than experts, ordinary players generally weren't a match for them.

It remained to be seen whether the bounty notice Bloodlust Blades put up would have any effect. But with such high rewards offered, it would undoubtedly tempt many players.

With Bloodlust Blades acting so aggressively, Nie Yan obviously had to fight back with even greater ferocity. In the previous timeline, he had been repeatedly hunted down by major guilds, especially the five under Cao Xu's command. He was absolutely reviled by them, because he often popped up out of nowhere to launch sneak attacks and kill their players. With his hit-and-run tactics, he had killed hundreds of their guild members, an extraordinary accomplishment that had garnered their hatred. Of course, such a deed had its price: he had died five times during his ambushes. Because of this, Nie Yan absolutely abhorred this kind of large-scale bounty hunting. Now that he had the money, he would definitely take back every inch of skin he had lost!

This sort of bounty notice was a war of resources, a competition to see who had more gold.

Nie Yan added further details to the bounty notice he released in the Union of Assassins. The reward would differ depending on the player's level. The higher the level, the better the reward. The leadership and strongest members had larger bounties put on their heads, upwards of several hundred gold. Bloodlust Mad Blade was at the very top with 3,000 gold. Level 30 or below players netted no reward because Bloodlust Blades didn't accept anyone that weak.

The vast majority of their players were around Level 35. Killing the same player repeatedly would net diminished rewards: 2 gold for the first time, 1 gold for the second, 50 silver for the third, and so on. Furthermore, the reward for killing a red named player and making them drop all their equipment was 5 gold. A kill didn't count if the nearby enemy Priests weren't all eliminated.

When Nie Yan passed down this bounty notice to the Union of Assassin, it immediately garnered the attention of the entire organization. Such high rewards were extremely enticing, much more lucrative than the usual leveling missions.

The Union of Assassins had gathered professional players from all across the nation. All of them showed great interest in the mission. The transfer points in Calore lit up brilliantly as waves of professional players flocked to Glory City.

It was impossible to predict how much success the Union of Assassins would have. But one thing was certain. The vast majority of professional players were highly skilled experts. Nie Yan's bounty notice even caused some professional players who joined Asskickers United to depart for Glory City.

It would take a while for the Union of Assassins to show some results. Meanwhile, back on the thread Bloodlust Blades issued out on the forums, the kill count was still rapidly rising. Over 300 players from Asskickers United had already been killed. Bloodlust blades was only required to pay out 600 gold for this while Asskickers United had suffered several thousand gold in damages. Seeing how effective it was, Bloodlust Blades issued out the bounty notice in every city's forum.

Nie Yan quickly issued out an order for the players of Asskickers United to conceal their identities while going out levelling.

Even Asskickers United couldn't deal with being pursued by so many ordinary players!

Nie Yan also released the bounty notice he put on Bloodlust

Blades out to the public.

The two guilds entered a war of attrition as gold flowed out like water, seeing which side could hold out the longest.

Nie Yan didn't know if Asskickers United's finances could support this war for very long. The entire guild nervously got to work, preparing for any dangers that might arise.

All the players in the Viridian Empire could smell the gunpowder in the air. The forums were full of heated discussion regarding the conflict.

「I think Bloodlust Blades is only pulling this kind of gambit because they want to reclaim some face for the ruckus Asskickers United caused in Glory City.」

「Who do you guys think will win?」

「I don't know. But if I had to pick a side, I would go after the players from Bloodlust Blades. I'm not willing to antagonize Asskickers United. I heard they're all quite ruthless. With a single word in their guild chat, you'll be instantly swarmed by thousands of their players. That kind of guild unity is too terrifying.」

「It's hard to say. Bloodlust Blades is really wealthy. They already have six strongholds, three of which are up and running while the other three are still under construction. I heard the Century Financial Group gave them a ton of money. Not to mention they have virtually no rivals in Glory City, so they grow unimpeded. Each one of their members have a lot of gold. If we're comparing resources, Asskickers United isn't necessarily a match for Bloodlust Blades.」

...

Out of these numerous discussions, two consensuses were reached. The first was that if this conflict lasted for more than 20 days, Asskickers United and Bloodlust Blades would have to personally get involved. The other was that from the very

beginning, Bloodlust Blades planned to see this war of attrition against Asskickers United through to the very end!

Which side was going to collapse first?

Nie Yan thought for a moment. If this conflict was going to last beyond a few days, he would have no choice but to prepare a few countermeasures to subsidize the cost, such as expanding Asskickers United's funding source, acquiring a few more strongholds, and expanding his businesses.

While Nie Yan was handling a few administrative affairs in the auction house, he received a message from Yao Yao. After reading it, he rushed over to Calore's east entrance.

...

Calore's east entrance.

This was a wide open street with store fronts lining both sides. There were all kinds of shops selling a large variety of items, such as potions, equipment, and so on. The number of people who passed through the east entrance were numerous, flowing in and out like a continuous stream.

Five youths were gathered here. There were four guys and a girl. One of them was Liu Rui. They were currently chatting while waiting. Liu Rui was a Level 42 Arcane Mage called Sky Piercer. As for the others, one was Level 43, two were Level 44, and one was Level 45. They were considered some of the strongest among ordinary players. There were two Warriors, one Priest, and two Mages. All their equipment was Level 40 Gold-grade. Of course, none of them wore sets.

"God damnit, Sky Piercer, your girlfriend sure is full of herself. She's made us wait for this long!" a young man who looked like a thug exclaimed. He was called Sky Pivot. He and Liu Rui had met at a bar. He was the type who wandered the streets late at night.

"What level is your girlfriend?" the short girl in the group asked.

Her face was pretty, but she was short and chubby, making for a weird contrast. She was called Heavenly Silk.

“I think she’s around Level 35. Her friend is also Level 30 something,” Liu Rui replied. From his memory, Xie Yao’s skills weren’t half bad. But compared to Victorious Return elites like them, she was far too lacking. After all, he was ranked in the top 100 players of all of Victorious Return! This position was a huge source of pride and something he had always liked to show off. Among his classmates, there was no one better than him!

“So low? Don’t invite trash like that over next time. All they do is sit around and leech experience. If it wasn’t for us giving you face, we wouldn’t even bother bringing her along. Not to mention she’s inviting another guy with her,” Sky Pivot said with great annoyance.

“Xie Yao is my woman. If the levelling is too slow, I’ll make it up to you guys some other time. As for the guy she invited, we can think of a way to get rid of him,” Liu Rui said. He didn’t know who Xie Yao invited, but because it was a guy, there was no need to be hospitable.

“It’s fine, we’re doing this for you after all. Otherwise, we wouldn’t bother bringing them along.” Sky Pivot’s eyes lit up as he feigned compromise after hearing Liu Rui’s words.

“I understand, thank you Seventh Bro,” Liu Rui said in a fawning tone.

The group waited for a long time. Just when they were about to break out in curses, they saw Xie Yao walking towards them from the distance.

Xie Yao wore whites robes and held an azure staff in her hand. She was beautiful and elegant, resembling a goddess who had descended down to earth. She didn’t carry the slightest bit of arrogance. All of the players on the streets halted in their tracks to stare after her. When their gazes fell on her face, it was difficult to

look away.

Sky Pivot and the other guys felt their breathing turn ragged. Xie Yao carried a type of noble air around her. Even for people like them, who had seen their fair share of beauties, their hearts were still moved. They inwardly muttered, I'll be damned. That kid's luck with women isn't half bad.

Seeing the tall and beautiful beyond compare Xie Yao, Heavenly Silk felt an intense surge of jealousy. In front of this dazzling beauty, she immediately felt her own radiance dim to nothing. She felt like she was the firefly's glimmer to the radiance of a full moon, or rubble to fine jade.

Seeing Xie Yao walking over, Liu Rui happily went up and greeted, "Yao Yao, you're here!" When he inspected her level, he petrified. He rubbed his eyes and checked again to make sure he wasn't seeing things. She was Level 47!

At this moment, a hard to describe emotion surfaced in Liu Rui's heart. He felt a sense of inferiority combined with shame welling up inside him. Previously, he had bragged to Xie Yao that he would take her levelling. But looking at the situation now, wasn't it the other way around?

Looking at Xie Yao's equipment, she was wearing the full Radiant Samsara Set, a top-tier Level 45 Gold-grade set. Even the strongest Holy Mage in Victorious Return, Fresh Fish, had only gathered three pieces of this set, a testament to its rarity.

At this time, Sky Pivot and the others also noticed Xie Yao's level and equipment. They were stupefied.

What the hell!? Level 47 with the full Radiant Samsara Set, just where did this powerful woman pop up from!?

Sky Pivot stiffly turned to Liu Rui and asked with his voice a bit hoarse, "She's Yao Yao? The one you want us to take levelling with?" He was already cursing in his heart. What the hell was that

brat Liu Rui pulling!? A Level 47 player with the full Radiant Samsara Set was an unapproachable existence! Even if you gave them the most generous evaluation, there was still no way they could compare to her. Yet just a moment ago, they were calling her trash that could only leech experience?

Chapter 324 – Utterly Eclipsed

“Yao Yao, y-y-ou... When did you reach Level 47?” Liu Rui asked, practically dying from embarrassment. He had been bragging to Xie Yao all day about being Level 42 and wanting to take her levelling with him, only to discover that she was actually Level 47 with a full Radiant Samsara Set. He felt like a buffoon. He wanted to dig a hole and bury his head in the ground.

“I’ve been Level 47 for a week now. I was busy completing a quest called Karsi’s Blessing, so I had no time to level,” Xie Yao replied. Her cold and indifferent expression caused Liu Rui to become restless. An intense feeling of inferiority sprouted in his heart. He could accept being beaten by Nie Yan in a spar since losses occurred in competition. But now he was completely eclipsed by Xie Yao in terms of level and gear! He couldn’t even compare to a girl! What face did he have left?

Sky Pivot and his group were awed when Xie Yao mentioned Karsi’s Blessing. This was an incredibly difficult quest chain. Even their strongest Holy mage, Fresh Fish, failed to clear the first part!

Just obtaining the qualifications to attempt this quest was out of reach for the vast majority of players.

“God damn, what a powerful woman! She’s actually doing Karsi’s Blessing!” Sky Pivot restrained himself a little. It was highly likely such a skilled player had an equally powerful background. He didn’t wish to accidentally poke the bear.

The others also stepped off to the side. Liu Rui told them Xie Yao was his woman. But no matter how they looked at it, she didn’t seem to be.

“Yao Yao, I didn’t think your level was so high. I-”

“We aren’t that intimate. Please, call me Xie Yao,” Xie Yao interrupted.

“But, our families are long time friends. We’ve grown up together! Our parents and grandparents wish to see us together...” Liu Rui tried to persuade Xie Yao from a different angle.

“You’re wrong. My family has never expressed such wishes,” Xie Yao angrily rebuked. She hated it when Liu Rui played the family card.

Seeing the revulsion on Xie Yao’s face, Liu Rui didn’t dare to say more for fear of angering her further.

At this time, Sky Pivot and the others noticed the guild emblem on Xie Yao’s chest. It was Asskickers United’s!

In their minds, Victorious Return was no match for Asskickers United. They always felt a sense of inferiority whenever they encountered players from Asskickers United. How many times had Victorious Return suffered defeat at the hands of Asskickers United? They had lost all sense of confidence.

“So she’s a member of Asskickers United? I was just wondering which guild could acquire such a strong player,” Sky Pivot muttered.

“Didn’t you say you were going to take me levelling? My friend will be arriving here any minute now.” Xie Yao looked at Liu Rui who no longer dared to meet her gaze.

With his head lowered, Liu Rui’s eyes flashed with traces of bitterness. He was on the brink of erupting out in anger because of the humiliation he just received. Xie Yao had made him lose a great deal of face. But after thinking it over, his expression grew sullen. His family was far from being comparable to hers. It was impossible for him to take any action against her. Although his father was a shareholder in the Dragonsoar Financial Group, the largest shareholder was still Xie Yao’s maternal grandfather. At the same time, she was also a shareholder in the Glory Financial Group. The influence of her father’s side of the family wasn’t to be underestimated either. In terms of background, status, and wealth,

he was far inferior to her. This was also the reason why he kept trying to court her.

Not only were Liu Rui's efforts fruitless, but Xie Yao was also fed up with his antics. She only resorted to this tactic because he refused to take a hint.

After today's events, would Liu Rui still have the face to pester her?

"Little Rui, she's just a bitch. So what if her level is high? Why are we even bothering with her!?" Heavenly Silk sneered. She was incredibly envious. Whether it was background, looks, or temperament, she couldn't hold a candle to Xie Yao. It was like comparing a piece of slag to a diamond.

Xie Yao gently laughed it off. The best way to deal with these types of people was to ignore their very existence. Nevertheless, she didn't feel very comfortable. Sky Pivot was staring at her intently, not at all concerned to mask the perverse look in his eyes.

"Her figure isn't bad," Sky Pivot said to Liu Rui. Evil thoughts surfaced in his mind. Since that kid knows her in real life...

Liu Rui was fidgeting around nonstop. His previous good impression with Xie Yao had disappeared, and the two people beside him were only making matters worse.

Liu Rui glared at Heavenly Silk, but he was somewhat afraid of Sky Pivot.

Yao Yao looked over in the distance. Nie Yan had arrived and was currently walking over.

"Yao Yao, I'm here. What did you need me for?" Nie Yan greeted Yao Yao, then looked at the several players beside her. His eyebrows slightly trembled when he recognized Sky Piercer.

It's Liu Rui!

He didn't expect to run into his old enemy here.

Liu Rui looked completely different from his real self. But Zhai Hao would often challenge him to PvP matches in the previous timeline. So, Nie Yan had seen him a couple times before and remembered his appearance.

Liu Rui had stolen Xie Yao away from him in his past life! Even if he was burnt to ashes, Nie Yan would still recognize him!

Why is Liu Rui here? Why is Yao Yao with him? Do they know each other? Doubt surfaced in Nie Yan's heart. Scenes from his past past life flashed before his eyes. As he gazed at Yao Yao's back, her silhouette and Xie Yao's began to merge together. Could Yao Yao actually be Xie Yao?

The thought threw Nie Yan for a loop. He carefully recollected his experiences with Yao Yao.

He had met Yao Yao through a friend. But he didn't think Yao Yao was someone he was already acquainted with in real life. His friend also never mentioned anything about her identity.

In the previous timeline, Yao Yao said she was from Longjiang which was over 1,000 miles away from where he lived in Huahai. So they never met. If Yao Yao was Xie Yao, why did she pretend to be someone else?

Xie Yao and Yao Yao roughly had the same build. But due to the appearance scrambler in Conviction, it was difficult to say the two looked alike.

He only met Yao Yao in Conviction after graduating from high school. At that time, he had lost all contact with Xie Yao, except for the occasional class reunions where he only dared to steal glances at her from afar.

Back then, Nie Yan was depressed, depraved, and debaucherous. Even though Xie Yao had called him once, he only spoke a few words before hanging up. He didn't wish for her to see him in such a state, for his dirty self to profane the goddess of his dreams. He

wanted to preserve the few good memories they shared together.

When he met Yao Yao in the game, her concern was like the gentle beam of sunlight that brought some warmth to his gloomy life. However, his heart already belonged to Xie Yao. He recalled the time he was trapped with Yao Yao in the secret chamber. Her beautiful naked body was deeply engraved into his mind. The memory of that night was something he could never forget. If Xie Yao and Yao Yao really were the same person...

Then why would Xie Yao...?

Nie Yan's mind was thrown into disarray.

He had no evidence to support this revelation. He could only seek out the truth later on. He halted his steps for an instant before walking over to Yao Yao and Liu Rui's group.

Since his appearance was different in Conviction, Liu Rui most likely wouldn't recognize him.

Nie Yan's eyes narrowed. Whether it was in real life or the game, he wanted to crush Liu Rui beneath his feet.

Liu Rui's group turned their heads when they heard Nie Yan's voice, whereupon their gazes immediately turned sluggish.

This player was unmistakably Nirvana Flame!

Who in Calore hadn't watched Nie Yan's videos? Just about everybody recognized his appearance. Liu Rui's group was no exception! They found it hard to swallow their saliva. Just who was Nirvana Flame? He was an existence that reigned supreme in Calore! Even Victorious Return's guild leader, Heaven Breaker, had no choice but to step aside!

Fuck! Why is our luck so bad today? Why did we have to bump into such a godly existence? Liu Rui, Sky Pivot, and the others glanced at each other in dismay.

Nie Yan was currently only Level 30 something, but did they

have the ability to take him levelling? This was the joke of the century!

With Nie Yan's current equipment, he could dispatch all of them with a casual strike. The short sword glowing with dark flames strapped to his waist was especially frightening. Even if he was only Level 30 something, he was still unrivalled!

Liu Rui's group recalled the words they spoke before Yao Yao and Nie Yan had arrived. Looking at things now, it was ridiculous. Just who was the trash? They were, of course!

Liu Rui stared at Nie Yan with a vacant expression. He never expected that the Level 30 something friend Yao Yao invited was actually Nirvana Flame!

"What are we standing around for? Let's leave!" Sky Pivot shouted. They were simply losing face staying here. Taking those two levelling? What a joke! One was a Level 47 Holy Mage with the Radiant Samsara Set while the other was the guild leader of Asskickers United!

Only now did Liu Rui understand what Xie Yao was telling him. He should remove any notion he still held of marrying her from his mind!

Liu Rui's so-called excellence was nothing but dregs! He had been taken down by Nie Yan with a single kick in real life during their spar. He couldn't even compete with Xie Yao herself in the game. Every person around her was far more outstanding than him!

Liu Rui sunk into a daze as a deep sense of failure engulfed him.

Sky Pivot and the others felt a bitter taste in their mouths as they left.

Liu Rui stared at Nie Yan venomously before taking his leave.

Any more words at this point would be wasted.

Nie Yan was slightly stunned. "What was that all about? Why did

they leave after I arrived?”

Unaware of what just transpired between Liu Rui and Xie Yao, Nie Yan was completely baffled.

“Just a bunch of annoying flies. Don’t mind them,” Xie Yao replied. When she gazed at Nie Yan, her cheeks burned hot as she recalled her video call with him.

Nie Yan nodded. His eyes flickered with killing intent as he gazed at Liu Rui’s back.

Chapter 325 – Declaration of War

Liu Rui was a fellow who would take revenge for the smallest slight to his pride. Nie Yan had already sowed the seeds of hatred with him during their spar. Who knew when that fellow would try to settle the score? If this threat wasn't thoroughly eliminated, Nie Yan wouldn't have any peace of mind. With recent revisions to the law, anyone connected to the murder of a citizen would be prosecuted, including the mastermind. No one could escape their punishment! Thanks to the advancement of satellite technology, investigating a murder case was simpler than ever!

This was also why the crime rate saw a steep decline over the last several decades.

Nie Yan only dared to assassinate Cao Xu in the previous timeline because he was prepared to die himself.

Nie Yan had to carefully think of a way to deal with Liu Rui while still staying within the realms of the law. What put his mind at ease was that Xie Yao probably wouldn't end up with Liu Rui in this life. He was making steady progress with her. At this pace, she would sooner or later become his girlfriend.

Nie Yan passed down an order to Guo Huai.「Keep watch over a player called Sky Piercer from Victorious Return. Send the Hundred Thieves to take care of him. I want him PKed back to Level 0. So long as he steps foot out of the city, I want you to send him back to the graveyard!」

Perhaps it was due to his father's influence, but Nie Yan had always possessed this sort of fiery temperament. If he considered something his, no one else was allowed to touch it, especially if this thing was his woman! Father Nie used to be an army ruffian in his youth, getting into all sorts of escapades. Only after meeting Mother Nie did he mellow down. But that rowdy nature was passed down to Nie Yan. This was the so-called dragon begets a dragon

and phoenix begets a phoenix.

Nie Yan was fine being called petty and selfish. He never claimed to be a good person in the first place. He believed in an eye for an eye. All the preaching about turning the other cheek was utter nonsense!

「Understood, I'll get right to it!」Guo Huai nodded. This was the first time Nie Yan had ever given him such an order. This Sky Piercer fellow must have done something really awful to piss Nie Yan off this much.

Guo Huai naturally understood Nie Yan's temperament. His brother was quite terrifying when provoked.

A scout from Asskickers United quickly tracked down Liu Ru and his group after following the directions Nie Yan provided. As soon as they stepped out of the city, they would be ambushed by a squadron of Thieves. A total of ten highly skilled Thieves were dispatched, three of whom were specifically assigned to Liu Rui!

When Nie Yan's gaze fell on Yao Yao, he suddenly felt her and Xie Yao's expression were awfully similar!

How wonderful would it be if Xie Yao and Yao Yao were one and the same? Nie Yan felt his heart race as several seductive scenes floated into his mind. He resolved to find out the truth no matter what!

Only now did Yao Yao notice the announcement post on the guild page. She turned to Nie Yan and asked, "Are we going to war with Bloodlust Blades?"

"Yeah." Nie Yan nodded. "But this war is different from the ones before. Victory will be decided by who has the deeper pockets, and I'm afraid we'll be the ones to collapse first. They have the backing of the Century Financial Group." Asskickers United was currently hemorrhaging gold at a frightening rate. Between the time it took for him to get from the Central Auction House to Yao Yao, more

than 2,000 players from Asskickers United had died due to being ambushed in the wilderness. However, these players couldn't just stop going out to level; otherwise, the losses would be even greater!

Asskickers United couldn't allow Bloodlust Blades to just do as they pleased. Giving them a taste of their own medicine was undoubtedly the best way to retaliate.

It was a competition of wealth! Which side would collapse first?

Over 16,000 players from the Union of Assassins had accepted the bounty notice issued out by Nie Yan. They all successively left for Glory City. He didn't know how much success they would have. But considering their skills, they would definitely kill quite a few players from Bloodlust Blades. Nie Yan only worried about what to do when it came time to pay them.

Besides the bounty rewards, Nie Yan also had to provide monetary support to fallen guild members. If he didn't, they would be crushed under the pressure.

Asskickers United simply couldn't catch a break. Right after settling one conflict, the next would arise.

Asskickers United was on the verge of a financial crisis. But they couldn't afford to back out even if it meant bankruptcy. They absolutely couldn't be the first to pull out in this game of chicken, lest they fell into a perilous situation where they were surrounded on all sides.

At this moment, a new post from Bloodlust Blades appeared on the forums.

「Asskickers United, do you dare to fight?」

Below were more provocations followed by Bloodlust Mad Blade's declaration of war.

「Let everyone be witness to my words. Whoever is the first to remove their bounty notice is the other's grandson. Mad Rogue, do you have the guts? Kill Count: 2,382」

This was a provocation from Bloodlust Blades! Only two hours had passed since they released their bounty notice!

Within seconds of the post going up, the guild chat of Asskickers United erupted out in a rage.

「Fuck those bastards! If they want a fight, we'll give them a fight! Who the hell is afraid of them!? We've wiped the floor with Azure Falling Sky, Unhindered, Radiant Sacred Flame, and Victorious Return! What's another name to the list!？」

「Boss, we're not afraid of them! Let's slaughter a path to Glory City!」

「The transfer fee to Glory City is 1 gold. We'd just be increasing the burden on the guild. Not to mention Glory City is the territory of Bloodlust Blades. Their guild has over 100,000 players. Combined with their branch guilds, they have at least 400,000 players in total! Do you think they're easy pickings? We'd get completely overwhelmed! Listen to what the boss has to say!」

「Boss, isn't this just a battle of who's got more gold to burn? We have so many brothers in our guild. What's there to be afraid of? Let's just pool our gold together! We'll drain their treasury down to the last copper! I have 3 gold! 」

「I have 2 gold!」

「I also have 2 gold!」

「The guild has done so much for us. It's time for us to return the favour!」

...

One player after another chimed in, further igniting everyone's emotions. Before long, the whole guild wanted to donate for this cause.

Seeing the fervent support in chat, Xie Yao gazed at Nie Yan. Just what was it that made him so charismatic? So many players were

willing to empty out their pockets without the slightest hesitation for the sake of the guild. Even though Asskickers United did have some selfish players, those who watched on without lifting a finger were a miniscule minority.

Nie Yan looked at the guild chat. Every player firmly had his back! What was there for him to be afraid of? Even if Bloodlust Blades was 10 times more powerful, could they match this solidarity? No, of course not! The sense of camaraderie in Asskickers United was built up through countless battles. After facing one crisis after another, they only grew more united! It wasn't something a guild like Bloodlust Blades which had expanded without facing the slightest hardship would understand!

This sort of tenacity allowed Asskickers United to only grow stronger with every war!

Would the ordinary players of Bloodlust Blades step forward bravely like the brothers in Asskickers United when faced with a similar situation? The answer was a resounding no! They would flee like rats!

Nie Yan's eyes began to water after witnessing the passion of these players. He took a deep breath to settle his mind.

「What the hell? I take my eyes off the chat for a second, and you guys are already holding a donation rally. You're planning a disaster relief for yourselves? Aren't you putting the cart before the horse?」Nie Yan scolded in a joking manner.

「Boss, you're here!」

「Boss, Bloodlust Blades has gone too far! We'll pool our gold and see who lasts longer!」

The guilds members grew excited when Nie Yan showed himself.

「We receive support from the Dragonsoar Financial Group every few days. I can also still take out a few hundred thousand gold myself. Put away your gold for now. If we really can't hold out any

longer, I won't stop you guys,」Nie Yan said. He had no idea how much gold Bloodlust Blades had in reserve.

「Wow, the boss is so rich!」Nie Yan's revelation shocked them. Even though the Dragonsoar Financial Group had invested a lot of gold into them, most of it had been spent on providing them with mounts. They believed it would be impressive if he could even take out 50,000 gold. Who knew he actually had this much gold saved up!

Truthfully, Nie Yan didn't actually have that much gold. However, his auction houses, the Starry Night Potion Shop, and his other businesses brought in a lot of gold every day. In a short amount of time, he could pool together quite a bit. If he added this to the support from the Dragonsoar Financial Group, he could barely scrape by.

Nie Yan did some calculations. The 20,000–30,000 gold he made every day wasn't enough. He could sell off one or two plots of lands. However, this was a last measure since their value would only rise in the future.

Unless absolutely necessary, Nie Yan wasn't willing to touch the gold of his guild members. After all, the 1 or 2 gold they had was their blood and sweat! In case something happened, they wouldn't have any emergency funds!

Nie Yan was wracking his brain over how to make gold quickly. Capturing more strongholds was probably their best bet.

Seeing Nie Yan's helpless expression, Yao Yao bit her lips. Only she could help him at a time like this! She sent a message to Yu Rui.

After a while, Nie Yan received an excited message from Guo Huai.「The Dragonsoar Financial Group has agreed to provide us 100,000 gold to tide us over during these difficult times.」

Nie Yan blinked. How did the Dragonsoar Financial Group react almost instantly after he came across a problem? He glanced

skeptically at Yao Yao beside him. His suspicions that she was actually Xie Yao only grew. All the signs pointed to this being the case, and many inexplicable events would suddenly make sense!

「Send my thanks to the Dragonsoar Financial Group's supervisor.」

「I've already passed it on,」Guo Huai replied.

This 100,000 gold couldn't have come at a better time. Nie Yan felt reassured in winning this war of attrition against Bloodlust Blades!

Chapter 326 – Unprecedented Unity

「How should we respond to Mad Blade?」Guo Huai asked. Not responding to the post meant Asskickers United was taking this humiliation lying down. No matter what, they couldn't back down!

「It's fine. I'll do it myself.」Nie Yan opened up the forums and prepared a response to Bloodlust Mad Blade's post.

「Alright.」Guo Huai nodded, then focused on another matter of importance. After killing some members of Bloodlust Blades, players were arriving to collect their bounties. He began distributing the rewards according to the criteria Nie Yan set.

When Nie Yan opened up the forums, the players from Bloodlust Blades were still in the midst of mocking Asskickers United. They were clearly hoping to goad their enemy into taking rash action.

Truthfully, such meddling wasn't necessary. With Bloodlust Blades declaring war, Asskickers United would naturally take up the challenge.

Nie Yan wrote a reply to Mad Blade's post.

「Azure Falling Sky, Unhindered, Radiant Sacred Flame, Victorious Return... Asskickers United has never been afraid of anyone. This time is no exception. Why go through all these hoops just to declare war? We'll sweep through Glory City and flatten Bloodlust Blades!」

The Mad Rogue responded! The forums erupted with excitement. Many players were deeply moved after reading the reply. Nirvana Flame was just as domineering as ever!

When Nie Yan's reply was shared in guild chat, the fighting spirits of the players from Asskickers United were ignited, and they roared out in cheers.

「Sweep through Glory City! Flatten Bloodlust Blades!」

「Fuck those dog bastards from Bloodlust Blades!」

...

Below Nie Yan's declaration was also a number.

of Bloodlust Blades players killed: 1,563

Asskickers United's bounty notice was put up over an hour after Bloodlust Blades released theirs, so for their kill count to be lower was nothing strange. However, it was rising at a frightening rate!

Of course, the victor wouldn't be decided by whose kill count was higher but rather who could hold out until the very end!

No one was clear on the wealth of Bloodlust Blades. Asskickers United could only fight them with all their strength!

In just a short hour, Nie Yan already had to pay out over 3,000 gold.

Knowing the guild was facing a financial crisis, the players from Asskickers United who were ambushed and killed refused to accept any form of compensation.

At this time, Paladin of the Elegy appeared in guild chat.「Looking for more to form a Level 40 gold farming group. We're going to grind in the Level 40 map, Flowing Gold Plains!」

Gold farming group! It was as if the entire guild shared the same epiphany.

「Forming a Level 35 gold farming group!」

「Forming a Level 40 gold farming group!」

「Tough Jerky, where are you? Hurry up over to the Calore transfer area!」

「Liu Shu, let's gather at Calore's south entrance!」

...

The chat was flooded with messages from players looking to form gold farming groups. One team after another departed from Calore

and set off for easy farmable maps. Although the experience gain was pitiful, the consumable costs were kept at a minimum, and the drop rate for both money and items was decent. All the loot they collected would be donated to the guild!

As elite players, they normally disdained this sort of work. But right now, with the guild facing a huge crisis, everybody was trying their best to pitch in.

Nie Yan was deeply moved by the actions of these guild members.

「Thank you, everyone!」Nie Yan said in guild chat. As long as Asskickers United had such loyal players, it would never fall!

「Boss, you're treating us like outsiders. We're family. We rise and fall together. When the guild is in trouble, it's only natural for everyone to share the burden!」Paladin of the Elegy replied. His words were quickly echoed by others in the chat.

「Elegy is right! Boss, don't worry! With all of us working together, Bloodlust Blades can only flee with their tails tucked between their legs! Let's see which side falls first!」

Transfer points all over Calore lit up brilliantly as 20-player teams set out in every direction. All of them were burning with determination and were not the slightest bit discouraged.

The rest of Calore was amazed by this sight.

“What's Asskickers United doing?”

“I heard from a friend the players in Asskickers United are forming gold farming groups to support the guild. They're planning to see this conflict with Bloodlust Blades through to the very end!” a player explained.

Seeing the soaring morale of these players, everyone shared the same thought: Do not provoke Asskickers United! With this kind of resolve, it would be strange if they didn't achieve victory!

60,000 players grinding in Level 40 maps could generate roughly

30,000 gold a day. This was purely from the money that dropped! If you added in the value of the equipment, the number might even double or triple! But if unexpected trouble occurred, the profit would be somewhat smaller.

One gold farming group after another departed from Calore.

Back at Bloodlust Blades' guild headquarters in the Red River Stronghold, Bloodlust Mad Blade was monitoring the situation over in Calore. His gaze was a bit distracted. He never expected that the players from Asskickers United would take such action. He asked himself if his players would do the same when faced with a similar situation? The answer was a resounding no!

If he asked his players to sacrifice themselves for the guild, it would be impressive if they didn't revolt!

When Mad Blade looked at the video of the Asskickers United players setting out from Calore, he saw them brimming with fighting spirit. Every single one of them carried the resolve to fight to the bloody end!

Just how did Nirvana Flame do this?

Even though Asskickers United only had 60,000 players, Mad Blade became painfully aware of their strength. This sort of power didn't come from numbers but rather unshakable unity! Outside of Asskickers United, could another such guild be found? Perhaps not even Angel Corp in the Satreen Empire could pull this off.

Mad Blade didn't have to worry about gold thanks to the Century Financial Group. However, if all 60,000 players of Asskickers United continued farming gold like this, it would truly be difficult to tell who would emerge victorious.

Mad Blade had a vague feeling that Bloodlust Blades would fail to swallow up Asskickers United. He still had two allies. If worse came to worst, he could call in the support of Divine Protectors and Alliance of Mages.

A hint of fear emerged in Mad Blade's heart. A guild like Asskickers United was simply too dangerous. With this sort of unity, they could sweep through everything in their path. They shared an eerie resemblance to the Dark Hero guild during its prime.

The Dark Hero guild had fallen, its glory no more. However, the present Asskickers United was just like a newly arisen Dark Hero guild!

If Asskickers United was allowed to grow, there would be no place left for Bloodlust Blades in the Viridian Empire!

No matter the method or price, Asskickers United had to be eliminated!

Mad Blade busily got to work.

For the time being, it was hard to determine who would come out on top in this war. Nie Yan began making some preparations. He would make some adjustments to his money-making businesses and raise the rent on his shops. Recently, business was booming. They had made a lot of profit, so it was only natural for them to share some of the good fortune.

Nie Yan raising the rent on his shops would definitely upset some merchants. However, there was nothing they could do. Calore and Nisode were his domain. He simply owned too many properties, not to mention all of them were in prime real estate locations. He had complete market dominance. If he chose to take back his shops, their losses would be even greater! For the sake of earning money, they had no choice but to concede to his demand.

Nie Yan chatted with Yao Yao for a while. She still had to do the second part of Karsi's Blessing. The beginning of the quest wasn't difficult, only a bit tedious. The two of them separated, and he went to stock up on some basic consumables. After checking his character information, he noticed his Intermediate Combat Bandages was only a few points away from ranking up. He went to

buy some Silk Cloth.

Nie Yan was a lot more restrained when buying items, unlike before where he would practically empty out an auction house of something he needed. He simply had too many expenses and not enough gold.

Nie Yan sent Tang Yao a message. 「Want to help me do a quest?」

「Sure. Where are you?」

「I'm waiting at the Calore transfer area.」

Tang Yao quickly met up with Nie Yan.

“What kind of quest are we doing?” Tang Yao curiously asked.

Nie Yan glanced at the Arcane Fairy floating beside Tang Yao and asked, “Is your Arcane Fairy Rank 4 yet?”

“No, it's still a ways off. Rank 4 is too hard to get. I estimate it'll take at least another month,” Tang Yao replied.

“In that case, it'll be a bit difficult but still doable. It's a pretty simple quest and doesn't take a lot of time. Follow me. We're teleporting to Soyu Town.”

“That's a Level 60 map!” Tang Yao blurted out in surprise. Did Nie Yan go mad? Why were they going to such a place to do a quest?

“It's fine. Just follow me. I've investigated and discovered some good things in that map. It'll be a quick trip,” Nie Yan said as he began walking towards the transfer point.

Tang Yao quickly followed behind him. Since the start of the game to now, had Nie Yan ever lied to him? If his brother said it was fine, it was fine! This was the sort of unwavering faith that came from their bond!

Nie Yan proved time and time again that he was trustworthy, so Tang Yao had no reason to doubt him.

As the two stepped onto the transfer point, they teleported away with a brilliant flash of light. Before them appeared a deserted town with only a few buildings scattered here and there. As gusts of wind blew in, the entire town was shrouded in granules of yellow sand.

“Let’s go,” Nie Yan said as he walked toward a fairly eye-catching building. It was a slightly dilapidated mud house which had been badly damaged by the elements. It was teetering on the verge of collapse.

Chapter 327 – Twisting Vines Scroll

Nie Yan and Tang Yao walked into the building. The walls which were covered in cracks looked like they could collapse at any moment. Many NPCs were stationed inside. All of them wore desert clothing with hoods that draped over their faces. They sold a variety of consumables and crafting materials, all of which were local specialties.

Nie Yan led Tang Yao past these NPCs to a remote corner in the back, where they stopped in front of a shabby wooden door. Behind it was a narrow underground passageway.

“Let’s go,” Nie Yan said as he walked down.

“Where are we going?” Tang Yao asked. The passageway was so dark he couldn’t even see his feet. He could only rely on his other senses to follow Nie Yan.

“We’re going to an NPC to buy a few scrolls,” Nie Yan replied. His ability to see in the dark had greatly improved thanks to Empress Finas’ Fate Pearl. His pupils narrowed into vertical slits and emitted a faint blue glow. Everything in the passageway became as visible as day.

“Oh! So we’re just buying scrolls!” Tang Yao breathed out a sigh of relief. However, he couldn’t help but think this NPC was too secretive. Without prior knowledge, this place was almost impossible to find. Perhaps only one or two players would occasionally stumble across it.

Secret NPCs were abundant in Conviction. They could be found in remote locations across every town and city. Trembling Milo back in Calore and Scroll Master Davina, who Nie Yan and Tang Yao were currently visiting, were examples of such NPCs. They often sold goods that couldn’t be found in regular shops.

Scroll Master Davina was an eccentric woman. There were many

rumours related to her floating around in this desert town. But little did everyone know that she was actually living below the town! Her temperament was odd. No one wanted to associate with her. She restricted the number of scrolls a player could purchase from her to 10 a day. If they tried to buy more, she would shoo them away with a nasty attitude. The items she sold were quite rare. Occasionally, some amazing items would emerge. Players were often able to get many good things from this place.

After walking through the passageway for several minutes, they saw a dim light up ahead.

“We’re here,” Nie Yan said, his pupils returning to normal as he walked toward the light. He surveyed the surroundings and saw a cramped room roughly 3 by 5 meters in size. The walls were lined with shelves filled with different kinds of scrolls, many of which were only half finished or incomplete. A desk and chair stood in the middle of the room. The remaining space could only accommodate two or three people at most. Scrolls were chaotically scattered across the floor.

Sitting behind the desk was a person in black robes which hid her appearance. All that could be discerned was that she was a woman. Her pale white hand was holding onto a slender ash-gray pen. She was scribbling on a piece of parchment, inscribing all sorts of strange runic patterns.

She was buried under a pile of scrolls. Her figure was solitary as if she was cut off from the rest of the world.

“She sells the scrolls?” Tang Yao asked. He was about to take a step forward.

Nie Yan quickly reached out his arm and stopped him. “Wait! Don’t move!”

Stopped by Nie Yan, Tang Yao’s foot remained hovering midway through a step.

Nie Yan bent down and started picking up the scrolls on the floor. With a pile of scrolls in his arms, he walked toward the shelves and started putting them away in an earnest manner.

Scroll Master Davina continued scribbling on the piece of parchment, ignoring Nie Yan.

In the previous timeline, when players discovered this place they boorishly stepped atop these scrolls. Not only did Scroll Master Davina refuse to sell them anything, she even drove them out of her dwelling. This was a hidden requirement. Players had to show Scroll Master Davina enough respect to purchase her scrolls.

Picking up the scattered scrolls on the floor was Scroll Master Davina's test for Nie Yan and Tang Yao.

Tang Yao quickly picked up on what was going on. He began helping Nie Yan clean up.

Before long, all the scrolls were neatly ordered on the shelves, and the room looked a little tidier.

Only now did Nie Yan and Tang Yao approach Scroll Master Davina.

"What do you need?" Scroll Master Davina asked in a hoarse voice.

Nie Yan browsed through the list of goods she had for sale. There were over 60 types of scrolls, including single-target spell scrolls, group-target spell scrolls, and all sorts of rare magic scrolls.

There was no lack of quality. Some scrolls which sold for several hundred gold in the marketplace could be found here for under 50 gold.

Scroll Master Davina sold a maximum of 10 scrolls a day, limiting Nie Yan's choices. His eyes quickly locked onto a certain scroll.

Advanced Twisting Vines Scroll: Summon vines to bind enemies and inflict them with a weakening effect for 30 seconds. Range: 30

meters. Cast Time: 10 seconds (1 set of syllables)

Price: 20 gold

Nie Yan directly bought 10 of them for 200 gold.

Spending so much money at this time slightly pained Nie Yan's heart. However, this quest couldn't be solved by just spending 200 gold.

"What scrolls did you buy?" Tang Yao asked. Looking at all the scrolls up for sale made his head spin. Every single one of them was a good item, only that their prices were a bit expensive. Some of them even cost upwards of several hundred gold!

"I bought 10 Advanced Twisting Vines Scrolls," Nie Yan replied. He bought these scrolls primarily to complete the quest.

"Only 10 Advanced Twisting Vines Scrolls? Nothing else?" Tang Yao asked in surprise. There were so many scrolls here. Every single one of them was quite useful. Why only buy Twisting Vines Scrolls?

"Let's go, we can buy more scrolls next time," Nie Yan said as he brought Tang Yao out of Scroll Master Davina's dwelling.

In the previous timeline, very few people knew of Scroll Master Davina's existence. He had only learned about her from a friend. Due to Davina only selling 10 scrolls a day, some people would scramble to get here at the start of the day to buy them. There were too many monks and not enough gruel, so most would fail at buying a scroll.

Nie Yan had only managed to snag a few scrolls in his past life, so his impression of Scroll master Davina wasn't that deep. Only after having to do this quest did he recall he could buy what he needed from her.

Nie Yan thought for a moment. Should he have Guo Huai send someone to buy scrolls from here every day? He would make quite a profit by selling them in the marketplace. For example, an

Advanced Twisting Vines Scroll could easily net 60 gold. The only problem was that if these things were put up for sale, it would attract a lot of trouble. If an enemy bought these scrolls, only to use it against them, that would be quite depressing.

He could first store these scrolls in the treasury. If Asskickers United was really hurting on funds, he could take them out to sell.

Nie Yan notified Guo Huai about purchasing scrolls from this place. He and Tang Yao exited the town and got on their mounts. The two of them galloped away, leaving behind a trail of dust.

“Where are we going now?”

“The center of the desert, Colin Gobi,” Nie Yan replied.

The Colin Gobi was a region of death in the desert. Nie Yan had learned some background information about this place in the previous timeline. It was originally just an ordinary desert, but became a haunted wreckage site after a Colin Airship was shot down by a squadron of Viridian Empire Griffon Knights over this place. The airship fell from the sky and crashed into the desert, spreading wreckage and debris everywhere. All sorts of broken frames could still be found to this day.

There was a famous boss in this area called Phantom Princess Ina, a Level 60 Lord-class monster. She didn't have any attacks, but she could summon powerful Evil Mages, ranging from 20 to 30 at a time. She respawned once a day. In the previous timeline, many people came here to fight her. If you passed this place, you would often see a vast ocean of players.

Looking ahead, large pieces of debris were scattered about. Some of them were over 30 meters high. Some wreck sites only covered a small area, but this one covered an entire desert. One could imagine how magnificent the Colin Airship was!

You have discovered the Colin Gobi.

“We're here. Let's dismount,” Nie Yan said. “I remember you had

a haste-type skill, what does it do?”

“Windchaser. It increases movement speed by 80% for 120 seconds. I can only use it on myself though,” Tang Yao replied. This was his only speed boosting spell.

Haste-type spells for Mages gave a relatively large boost. However, an 80% speed boost for a Mage wouldn't even equal a 30% speed boost for a Thief. Nevertheless, Windchaser was good enough.

“Windchaser? Not bad, follow me. Drink an Invisibility Potion,” Nie Yan said before entering stealth.

Tang Yao drank an Invisibility Potion and followed Nie Yan.

After moving for a while, they spotted swarms of phantoms in the distance. They were in a shadowy state. Their faces weren't clear. Nie Yan was only 20 meters away from them. He didn't dare to use Transcendent Insight to inspect them. The level difference was too high, so they might discover his existence if he did.

After passing through this area, Nie Yan spotted seven large phantoms up ahead. They were roughly 3 meters tall and held large iron mallets. They appeared valiant and fierce.

They were famous Phantom-type monsters in the previous timeline, Phantom Berserkers, Level 60 Elites that ignored physical attacks.

Phantom Berserker (Elite): Level 60

Health: 8,000/8,000

They didn't have much health. But since they were immune to physical attacks, Warriors couldn't hold their aggro. They would often shift targets and start madly pursuing the Mages. After killing all the Mages, the remaining melee class players were doomed because their attacks were useless against the Phantom Berserkers.

In the previous timeline, countless teams were wiped out by these Phantom Berserkers.

Chapter 328 – Standardized Equipment

“I just need you to help me kill 2 groups of Phantom Berserkers. I can handle the rest from there,” Nie Yan said. This was the first main obstacle in the quest.

These seven Phantom Berserkers resembled immovable titans, blocking Nie Yan and Tang Yao’s path.

“Are you kidding me?” Tang Yao stared at Nie Yan with an incredulous expression. Had this brother of his gone mad? How could they possibly deal with these seven Level 60 Elites!?

“I’m dead serious. Don’t worry, just follow my instructions. These Phantoms Berserkers don’t have any armour or magic resistance, so there’s no level suppression effect against low-level players. You basically deal true damage to them. They ignore physical attacks, but take an extra 30% damage from magic attacks. I’ll lock them down with Advanced Twisting Vines, then you wipe them out with a group-target spell,” Nie Yan explained. He wouldn’t have brought Tang Yao here if he didn’t have some form of assurance.

Tang Yao nodded. “Since you’re confident, tell me what I have to do.”

Nie Yan explained his plan to Tang Yao in detail.

“Alright, I’ll go draw their aggro according to your instructions,” Tang Yao said. He approached within 30 meters of the seven Phantom Berserkers.

Nie Yan got into position and gave the signal. Tang Yao waved his staff and shot out a ball of black flames.

「Boom!」The fireball struck one of the Phantom Berserkers, its flames scorching the surroundings black.

All seven Phantom Berserkers immediately locked onto Tang Yao. They swung their hammers and charged toward him.

Charge!

Charge!

After activating Charge, the Phantom Berserkers were several times faster than Tang Yao.

Holy shit! Tang Yao hurriedly activated Windchaser and bolted toward Nie Yan.

Seeing Tang Yao leading the Phantom Berserkers towards him, Nie Yan started activating the Advanced Twisting Vines Scroll as it lit up with a brilliant radiance.

The Phantom Berserkers quickly closed in on Tang Yao. He was simply too slow, and the level difference was too great.

Nie Yan, who was in the middle of activating the Twisting Vines Scroll, also broke out in a cold sweat. He never expected the Phantom Berserkers would be so fast after activating Charge. They could even outrun players on mounts which gave a movement speed bonus of 150%.

One of the Phantom Berserkers swung down its hammer at Tang Yao. It looked like he was about to be smashed into a meat patty.

In the last second, Tang Yao transformed into a seagull and desperately flapped away.

「Crash!」The hammer struck empty ground, leaving a small crater and sending sand flying everywhere.

Tang Yao actually managed to escape! After flying for about 30 seconds, he returned to human form and continued running towards Nie Yan.

Nie Yan never expected Tang Yao to have such a trick up his sleeve. He could immediately tell this was the effect of the special item, Ring of Transformation!

The Ring of Transformation allowed a player to transform into an animal of their preference, whereupon they would gain innate

skills based on the animal they transformed into. For example, the seagull Tang Yao just transformed into gave the player an enormous boost in movement speed as well as the ability to fly. However, they weren't allowed to attack, and getting hit would knock them out of the transformation. Furthermore, the Ring of Transformation's duration was extremely short at only 30 seconds.

In a dire situation like the one Tang Yao was just in, the Ring of Transformation was extremely useful.

After barely escaping by the skin of his teeth, Tang Yao breathed out a sigh of relief. Work like pulling mobs and drawing aggro really wasn't his cup of tea.

Seeing Tang Yao lead the group of Phantom Berserkers toward him, Nie Yan waved and activated the Twisting Vines Scroll.

Thick and solid vines shot out of the ground and tangled the feet of the charging Phantom Berserkers, stopping them dead in their tracks.

Tang Yao, who was previously fleeing for his life, turned around and waved his staff. After chanting several unintelligible syllables, a black cloud of flames condensed in the sky and started raining down flames on the Phantom Berserkers.

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-298

-305...

A blanket of damage values floated up into the air.

The Phantom Berserkers had no magic resistance, so Tang Yao basically dealt true damage. He continually retreated as he cast area-of-effect magic nonstop.

The Phantom Berserkers struggled ceaselessly, roaring and yelling in the blaze, but the vines firmly locked them down. Their

health fell by roughly 30%.

“Nice work!” Nie Yan faintly smiled.

The seconds ticked away.

“Get back 30 meters!” Nie Yan anxiously shouted. Tang Yao immediately retreated to a position 30 meters away from the Phantom Berserkers.

Before the vines released their grip on the Phantom Berserkers, Nie Yan began activating the second Advanced Twisting Vines Scroll.

After 30 seconds, the Phantom Berserkers broke free of the vines and charged toward Nie Yan.

They were getting closer and closer, 10 meters... 6 meters... 3 meters...

The Phantom Berserkers were like lions pouncing on their prey. When they were only 2 meters away from Nie Yan, the Twisting Vines Scroll in his hand disappeared with a flash of light. Vines shot out from the ground and began wildly growing.

The Phantom Berserkers were firmly bound right in front of Nie Yan.

Tang Yao let loose with another area-of-effect spell. Thanks to the support of his Arcane Fairy, he could fire spells without break.

The health of the Phantom Berserkers rapidly dropped.

Advanced Twisting Vines would only be effective three times. Afterwards, the Phantom Berserkers would become resistant to its effects.

However, three Twisting Vines bought enough time for Tang Yao to kill them.

Just like before, Nie Yan used the third and final Advanced Twisting Vines Scroll while Tang Yao continued attacking. When the last barrage of spells fell, the seven Phantom Berserkers let out

mournful roars before collapsing on the ground.

“Is it over?” Tang Yao asked in a daze. They had killed the Phantom Berserkers without a hitch thanks to Nie Yan’s strategy. Seven Level 60 Elites were dead just like that, he found this hard to believe.

Nie Yan once more proved with his actions that his judgement was correct.

The seven corpses of the Phantom Berserkers disappeared, leaving behind a pile of loot on the ground.

Nie Yan collected it all. Most of it was Level 60 equipment, ranging from Silver to Gold-grade. These pieces of equipment couldn’t be used for the time being. He continued rummaging around and found 3 gems with quality ratings of 7. Each one was worth over 120 gold. All at once, he had made back the money he spent on the Twisting Vines Scrolls.

A few other items also caught Nie Yan’s eye.

One was an Intermediate Revive Skill Book which currently couldn’t be found in the marketplace. It had an extremely low drop rate and only appeared in Level 50 maps or higher. With an Intelligence requirement of 580, he didn’t know if any Priest in the guild could learn it yet.

Furthermore, there were two Advanced Alchemy Recipes which were also quite valuable.

Out of the 7 Advanced Alchemists in Calore, 5 were currently in the Starry Night Potion Shop. Both Bird Leaves No Eggs and Quiet Nannan were about to break through from the Advanced rank to become Master Alchemists.

These two Alchemy Recipes would be very beneficial to both of them.

The final item caught Nie Yan’s attention the most, a Standardized Equipment Blueprint!

It was the Level 60 Gold-grade Sinister Light Set, a set of equipment for Arcane Mages. It could only be crafted by an Intermediate Tailor or higher. It required 3 Magic Rune Cloths, 2 Raging Flame Cloths, and 3 Golden Silk Threads. The Sinister Light Set wasn't the best Level 60 set available, but it was still pretty decent. Top experts probably wouldn't need it, but to mid-ranked players, this was definitely a treasure. Standardized Equipment Blueprints were different from regular blueprints in that they could be learned by up to 20 players. As long as there were enough crafting materials, these 20 Tailors could continuously craft this Level 60 Gold Set.

The Sinister Light Set was easily mass manufactured since the blueprint could be learned by Intermediate Tailors and the crafting material weren't that precious.

It was even possible to outfit guild members on a large scale with Standardized Equipment.

In the future, there would definitely be more and more Standardized Equipment.

After picking up all the loot, Nie Yan turned to Tang Yao and said, "Let's go onto the next group!"

In the next area, there was a group of 9 Phantom Berserkers. Employing the same method as before, Nie Yan and Tang Yao cleared these Phantom Berserkers. After picking up the loot, they found another Sinister Light Set Blueprint. With 2 of these blueprints in their possession, they could have 40 Tailors craft Sinister Light Sets at the same time.

Seeing the corpses of the Phantom Berserkers on the ground, Nie Yan turned to Tang Yao and said, "You can go back now. You won't be able to go to the next area."

Tang Yao looked up ahead. The monsters in the distance were densely concentrated. He nodded. "Alright, be careful."

Chapter 329 – Magical Device Book

Tang Yao didn't know what kind of quest Nie Yan wanted to do, but he understood it was difficult. He decided not to pry any further and started reading out a Return Scroll. With a brilliant flash of light, he teleported away.

The Phantom Berserkers could see through stealth, so it was crucial for Nie Yan to get rid of them to proceed. This was also why he bought the Advanced Twisting Vines Scrolls, which would bind phantoms and inflict a weakening effect on them.

Nie Yan surveyed his surroundings, closely observing the countless wandering Phantom Mages up ahead. They were much smaller than the Phantom Berserkers, only about the size of an ordinary person, and wielded staffs with flickering black flames floating above the tip.

Phantom Mage: Level 60

Health: 2,000/2,000

Phantom Mages were ordinary monsters. However, they possessed a special characteristic. They were immune to magical attacks but took double damage from physical attacks.

Nie Yan paced back and forth at the outskirts of the area for quite some time. Seeing a lone Phantom Mage ambling towards him, he fired at it with his Cavalry Crossbow before quickly pulling back.

「Put! Put! Put!」Five bolts struck the Phantom Mage in quick succession.

Since Nie Yan was outside of its attack range, the Phantom Mage chased after him.

Nie Yan kept retreating, pulling the Phantom Mage along with him. When he felt they were far enough away, he activated Shadow Waltz, disappearing into stealth, and dashed forward like a bolt of lightning.

The Phantom Mage's eyes lit up with a green glow. It quickly locked onto Nie Yan's position.

However, Nie Yan was simply too fast.

The Phantom Mage waved its staff. Soul Pierce! An eerie energy rippled outwards. This sort of attack was undodgeable!

The Soul Pierce struck Nie Yan and penetrated deep into his body.

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What frightening damage!

With a level difference of over 20, it was only natural for the Phantom Mage to deal serious damage to Nie Yan.

Nie Yan immediately drank an Intermediate Health Potion to recover his health. In the blink of an eye, he circled behind the Phantom Mage and plunged his dagger into it with Backstab before activating Blast.「Bang!」It violently trembled as the powerful explosion wreaked havoc inside its body.

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The Phantom Mage waved its staff.

Soul Shockwave!

A powerful soul energy blasted out toward Nie Yan.

It was impossible to dodge at such a close range. Nie Yan wasn't quite sure what category of magic Soul Shockwave belonged in, but he bit the bullet anyway and activated Mind Immune from the Medal of the Ten Holy Paladins.

The wave of soul energy slammed into Nie Yan's body and shaved away half of his health. He felt as if his body was tightly bound by a rope, leaving him unable to move even the slightest.

The Phantom Mage retreated a good distance away, then started chanting as a black fireball condensed above its palm.

Time appeared to come to a standstill as the Phantom Mage continued to mutter out one strange syllable after another.

It chanted for a full five seconds!

If the Phantom Mage's instant-cast spells could chunk Nie Yan for half his health, this was a sure-fire kill!

The black fireball whizzed through the air toward Nie Yan.

At this moment, Nie Yan regained control of his body.

Soul Shockwave dealt both Soul and Mind Damage, so Nie Yan managed to negate a portion of the damage with Mind Immune.

No matter how powerful Soul Shockwave's crowd control effect was, it couldn't lock him down forever.

Just as the black fireball was about to hit Nie Yan, he activated Gale Step, taking advantage of the invincibility to avoid taking damage. He pounced toward the Phantom Mage.

The Phantom Mage began condensing another fireball.

Nie Yan arrived in front of the Phantom Mage and slashed at its neck with Cut Throat, then followed up with a flurry of attacks. Hearing the final syllable being chanted, he delivered a powerful kick to its head and interrupted it.

Nie Yan circled around and finished off the Phantom Mage with another flurry of attacks.

Seeing the Phantom Mage collapse on the ground, Nie Yan breathed out deeply. The level difference was simply too large. Any powerful skill was lethal.

Only 3 silver dropped from the Phantom Mage's corpse.

Nie Yan gazed at the area up ahead. It was filled with roaming Phantom Mages. From time to time, a group of them would pass by.

Nie Yan activated the Pearl of Disguise. His body gradually

turned incorporeal while his appearance transformed into that of the Phantom Mage he just killed.

“Alright, so far so good,” Nie Yan muttered as he gazed at his ghostly hands.

Nie Yan lowered his head and started moving forward while mimicking the gait of the Phantom Mages.

The effectiveness of Disguise was also related to his ability to mimic the movements of his target. If he failed to properly imitate the Phantom Mage, he would be easily seen through.

Nie Yan was barely covering any ground. He would wander aimlessly for a while before inching towards his destination, one step at a time.

Like this, Nie Yan brushed past numerous Phantom Mages. He eventually encountered some ruins in the distance, where he spotted a figure that stood out from the masses.

This phantom had the appearance of a beautiful woman. She wore white robes and held a long scepter in her hand.

She was the Level 60 Lord, Phantom Princess Ina!

She was one of the few Lords that didn't possess any direct offensive skills. However, if she was attacked, she would summon multiple Evil Mages to her side.

Phantom Princess Ina was difficult to kill due to the sheer number of them she could summon at once.

She was precisely Nie Yan's target!

In the previous timeline, it was widely known that Thieves could steal precious items from Phantom Princess Ina. But the number of Thieves who could actually pull this off were few and far between. More often than not, a Thief making the attempt would be killed by a horde of Evil Mages. This led to Thieves having a love-hate relationship with her.

Nie Yan relied on his disguise to approach Phantom Princess Ina. He passed by one Phantom Mage after another. He could clearly see their faces. None of them looked alike, They kept their appearance from before they died.

Nie Yan was slowly made his way to Phantom Princess Ina. She glanced at him for a second but didn't notice anything strange, so she remained in a passive state.

Nie Yan was drawing ever closer to his target. His heart was racing. If she saw through his disguise, he would be doomed!

There were still several Phantom Mages around him when he finally approached within 2 meters of Phantom Princess Ina.

Nie Yan activated Steal.

Steal was unsuccessful.

Shit, I failed!

Phantom Princess Ina grew a little restless.

After a while, Phantom Princess Ina settled down and returned to a passive state. Nie Yan activated Steal again.

Steal was unsuccessful.

Crap! Another failure!

Phantom Princess Ina became restless. After a while, Nie Yan activated Steal yet again.

You have obtained Ina's Prayer Gloves (Sub Legendary).

Nie Yan's eyes widened in surprise. He had gotten a Sub Legendary item just like that? This was too amazing!

But on second thought, perhaps this was the system giving him a Luck bonus due to the level difference. After all, he was a Level 30-something roaming around in a Level 60 map.

At this moment, Nie Yan noticed Phantom Princess Ina glaring at him.

“Despicable human! Wretched thief!” Phantom Princess Ina cursed Nie Yan. She had seen through his disguise. The nearby Phantom Mages started surrounding him.

Shit! I was discovered! Nie Yan noticed all the Phantom Mages in the surroundings staring at him. They waved their staffs and unleashed a shower of spells on him.

Just as Nie Yan was about to be blown to smithereens, he activated God’s Blessing from the Chapter of Peace.

Adjudicator of God was still on cooldown, so he could only use God’s Blessing.

A barrier of light enveloped Nie Yan.

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」The spells rained down mercilessly on Nie Yan, but he didn’t suffer any damage.

All the while Nie Yan kept using Steal nonstop on Phantom Princess Ina.

Steal was unsuccessful.

Steal was unsuccessful.

You have obtained a Soul Gem.

You have obtained a Soul Gem.

Steal was unsuccessful.

You have obtained Della’s Magical Device Book (Legendary).

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Nie Yan finally obtained the item he had been looking for, a Legendary item! In the previous timeline, a player had stolen Della’s Magical Device Book from Phantom Princess Ina. It appeared this book was something for players to study. As for its uses, he had no idea. It was a pity he didn’t obtain a piece of Legendary equipment.

The book entered Nie Yan’s back. It was scarlet coloured with all

sorts of geometric shapes drawn on the cover, making it appear distinct.

However, Nie Yan didn't have the luxury to examine it right now.

One item after another was stolen from her, causing Phantom Princess Ina to become furious. She waved her scepter and summoned over 20 Evil Mages. They wore black robes with hoods that completely covered their faces.

Level 60 Elites!

However, they were Mages, so they couldn't do anything to him. Furthermore, he had an Unknown Transfer Scroll in his hand, ready to teleport away the moment God's Blessing wore off.

As the seconds passed, Nie Yan was bombarded with all kinds of magic.

Nie Yan appeared valiant, using God's Blessing to endure such a concentrated barrage. God's Blessing had a duration of 60 seconds. When it was over, the damage from any of these Evil Mages could kill him in an instant.

Nie Yan kept plunging his hand in-and-out and all through Phantom Princess Ina's dress with Steal, trying to pilfer as much loot as he possibly could. All the while he tightly held onto an Unknown Transfer Scroll in his other hand and ignored the spells raining down on him.

Steal was unsuccessful.

Chapter 330 – Abak's Gloves of Sealing

Steal had an extremely short cooldown, but it came paired with a pitifully low success rate. For it to succeed in 1 out of 30 attempts on ordinary monsters would already be quite impressive. However, Phantom Princess Ina was a well-known treasure trove, so the chances of obtaining something from her were relatively high. Then again, due to her ability to regularly summon hordes of Evil Mages, it was nigh impossible for ordinary Thieves to steal from her.

Nie Yan could only steal so many items from her because of the magic immunity from God's Blessing.

You have obtained 102 gold.

Seeing this notification, Nie Yan was given a great shock. Phantom Princess Ina was truly deserving of her royal title, giving 102 gold all at once.

The seconds passed as spells continued to bombard Nie Yan, doing absolutely no damage. However, the splashes created enough dazzling colors to rival a firework show, making it hard for him to see. He could only cover his eyes and repeatedly reach toward where he thought Phantom Princess Ina was.

Nie Yan kept careful track of the time remaining on God's Blessing. The moment it wore off, he would activate the Unknown Transfer Scroll gripped tightly in his hand without hesitation.

Steal!

Steal!

Nie Yan continuously pilfered items from Phantom Princess Ina, obtaining an Advanced Area-of-Effect Magic Scroll and two more Soul Gems.

Such a scroll would be sold by Scroll Master Davina for over 500 gold. The value of the Soul Gems was about 50 gold each. With

this, Nie Yan had made quite a profit.

It was a shame there was only a set number of items in Princess Ina's inventory. New things would only be added every so often. Repeatedly coming over to steal things from her would only end up depleting her stock, making it harder and harder to get anything from her.

Nie Yan was the first one to loot this treasure trove and her bag was currently filled to the brim. The success rate right now was the highest it would ever be, so he could snag multiple expensive items from her in a short amount of time.

Yet another successful theft notification appeared.

Nie Yan didn't have the chance to see what it was before time ran out. The Evil Mages cast another wave of spells, and he knew this barrage would spell the end for him if it landed.

Just as Nie Yan was about to be obliterated, he crushed the Unknown Transfer Scroll in his hand.

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」A series of explosions engulfed the area where Nie Yan previously stood.

His upright figure dissolved into nothingness, leaving not even a corpse behind.

As the scenery around him warped and twisted, Nie Yan reappeared in a vast desert. Within the blowing sands, it was impossible to tell which direction was which.

Giant lizards were everywhere, freely roaming the place. They were protected by a thick and rough skin that almost looked like a layer of hard metal. Their bulging eyes, which oddly resembled brass bells, glinted eerily.

Seeing these giant lizards, Nie Yan's face paled. They were the Level 300 monsters, Steel Armoured Monitors!

Crap! Just where the hell did I end up?

Nie Yan never expected to emerge in such a dangerous place!

Steel Armoured Monitors had very high Awareness. The closest one was more than 50 meters away, yet it instantly locked onto Nie Yan when he appeared. It started charging towards him immediately.

Its speed could only be described as monstrous. It was only 10 meters away in the blink of an eye. Suddenly, its entire body ignited and became a high-speed heavy fireball on course to slam into Nie Yan. His only impression as he quickly pulled up his inventory was a blast of heat so hot he felt like he was being barbecued.

Nie Yan was badly frightened by this Steel Armoured Monitor. Back when he was Level 180 in the previous timeline, he had once hunted an ordinary Level 300 monster with his friends. It took 20 players almost half an hour to kill it.

Nie Yan was currently nowhere close to being the Steel Armoured Monitor's match!

Just as the Steel Armoured Monitor arrived in front of Nie Yan and was about to swallow him whole, he used another Unknown Transfer Scroll and teleported away.

The Steel Armoured Monitor blinked and looked around in confusion. Since it couldn't find a trace of its ephemeral free meal, it returned to roaming the desert.

Nie Yan once more opened his eyes. This time, lush green vegetation appeared before him. He was clearly still in the desert, but this looked to be an oasis. A crystal-clear lake sat in the center, sparkling brightly in the sunshine.

Looking carefully to make sure there weren't any monsters nearby, he moved under a tree and took out a return scroll so he could go home.

System: Activating Return Scroll... 3%... 12%...

With a flash of white light, Nie Yan was back in Soyu Town. Seeing the familiar buildings around him, Nie Yan felt like a new man. He was finally safe! He hadn't expected to need two Unknown Transfer Scrolls to get out of danger this time. His luck really was a bit too poor.

Nie Yan took a look at his harvest and noticed a pair of dark violet gloves glistening brilliantly in his bag. Golden silk patterns were sewn into them with small gems embedded in between. They were covered in various runes, and their design was reminiscent of the Era of Shared Governance. Sharp barbs protruded out from the sides, giving the gloves a flashy look.

Rings of eerie energy circled the violet gloves, almost like a series of perverse halos.

It's these! Nie Yan's eyes lit up with joy.

He could search high and low to no avail, but in the end they came to him of their own accord! It turned out this was part of the Tyrant Abak Set!

Nie Yan quickly examined the pair of gloves.

Abak's Gloves of Sealing (Legendary): Unequippable

Requirements: 1,500 Strength, 1,200 Dexterity, Level 180

Description: This item can only be worn by the owner of the Glimpse of Darkness. It is only equippable when the owner has gathered the full set. Abak held strength in high regard. Only the powerful can become tyrants. Eliminate all traitors!

Properties: Attack +1,200, Defense +520, Strength +500, Dexterity +320, All Stats +100, Ignore Level, Chaos Damage.

Sealing Hand: Seal a target, leaving them unable to move, attack, or cast magic for 20 seconds.

Cooldown: 2 days.

Death's Touch (Toggle): Your attacks destroy armour, inflict

Corrosive Damage, and have a chance to instantly kill the enemy.

Cost: 5 Energy per second.

Set Completion: 1/8

This item is automatically bound to the owner of Volume I of the Book of Order. It cannot be traded or dropped.

(Wandering Princess's Mark: Phantom Princess Ina will hunt you down at all costs to retake Abak's Gloves of Sealing).

The violet aura around Abak's Gloves suddenly lit up. A powerful energy surged through Nie Yan's arms and forcibly bound itself to his soul.

Adventurer, you have found Abak's Gloves of Sealing. Pursue the remnants of history to unearth the glory of the past. Seek out Earl Kelfide. He might have some clues. Hurry, Adventurer! You only have 10 days before trouble comes knocking at the earl's door!

It was a bound piece of equipment, causing Nie Yan to be taken aback until he saw the gloves' properties. Just looking at this alone made it clear that the Tyrant Abak Set was insanely powerful. The set could only be worn at level 180, so it stood firmly at the peak of Legendary equipment. It didn't matter that it was bound since there would never be a need to replace it!

Nie Yan was flabbergasted as to why Abak's Gloves of Sealing would drop from the Level 60 Lord, Phantom Princess Ina. But after seeing the Phantom Princess's Mark, he bitterly chuckled. This piece of equipment was a hot potato. There was nothing funny about being pursued by a Level 60 Lord.

Nie Yan would have to wait for Smoke Stub and the others to reach Level 60, whereupon they could set up a trap and kill Phantom Princess Ina. Before then, he would have to be careful since he didn't know where or when she would show up. He searched the official website for some information and learned that Phantom Princess Ina would deviate from ordinary Lords

when her hidden quest was triggered. She would grow increasingly powerful every time she was killed, reviving after 30 days until she reached her final form which was a Level 180 Demonified Lord.

This was probably both the reason Abak's Gloves of Sealing were in her inventory and the result of pilfering them.

If Nie Yan could acquire all eight pieces of the Tyrant Abak Set, and fully unseal Zennarde's Sword, he would have a set of godly equipment! The whole world would bow at his feet!

Dragon King Zennarde was a legendary existence in the Era of Darkness. Tyrant Abak wasn't inferior in the slightest. The Era of Shared Governance was humanity's golden age. If he completed this set by the time he reached Level 180, no one would be his match.

However, collecting the full Tyrant Abak Set was no easy feat. Not to mention if Nie Yan wanted to get to Level 180, even if he focused all his attention on levelling up, it would take at least a year if not more. Who knew what sort of trouble would occur during that time? It still remained to be seen if he could even keep Abak's Gloves of Sealing secure in his bag.

Phantom Princess Ina could take Abak's Gloves of Sealing back. They weren't officially his yet! Obtaining the gloves could only be considered the first step.

Nie Yan would have to continuously defeat Phantom Princess Ina until she reached her final form as a Level 180 Demonified Lord. Only then would Abak's Gloves of Sealing truly belong to him!

Nie Yan contemplated for a moment before putting the gloves back in his inventory. He looked at the rest of his spoils and pulled out Dela's Magical Device Book. This thick book, meant for Tinkerers, had a torn cover and was in a generally shabby condition. After all, having existed for so long, it would be strange if it hadn't suffered any wear.

Dela's Magical Device Book (Legendary): Special Item

Requirements: Advanced Tinkerer

This Legendary book had been left behind by the fabled Dela, a goblin Tinkerer who had been captured by humans and put to work in the prisons of Calore. The goblins tried and failed multiple times to rescue him before sending a full-blown Colin Airship that finally managed to bring him away. However, the ship was shot down and crashed in the desert. Later, the humans found the goblin's corpse but Dela's Magical Device Book had disappeared without a trace.

Dela's Magical Device Book was a Tinkerer item.

Nie Yan wondered what was written in this thick Magical Device Book. He opened it up, causing a cloud of dust to rise up into his face and send him into a brief coughing fit. All kinds of exquisite design schematics entered his eyes.

One in particular immediately attracted Nie Yan's attention.

Chapter 331 – Tinkerer

It was a design schematic for Magic Bombs!

Magic Bombs were divided into Junior, Intermediate, Advanced, and Specialist ranks. Intermediate Magic Bombs could be crafted by Advanced Tinkerers. Advanced Magic Bombs required Master or even Grandmaster Tinkerers. As for Specialist Magic Bombs, no one knew what rank was required.

Even the best Tinkerer in the previous timeline was only a Grandmaster. Tinkerer was one of the hardest crafting professions.

Nie Yan also recognized a design schematic for Goblin Muskets, which served the same purpose as bows and crossbows but had a longer range. They were by far the favourite tool for drawing aggro. There were other design schematics for things such as Goblin Golems and Goblin Shrinkers as well.

These marvels were created by goblin civilization with their splendid magitech.

Dela's Magical Device Book was definitely a priceless treasure!

Today's harvest far exceeded Nie Yan's expectations and left him incredibly excited. He finally examined the first item he successfully pilfered from Phantom Princess Ina, the Ina's Prayer Gloves.

Ina's Prayer Gloves (Sub Legendary)

Requirements: 630 Intelligence

Properties: Defenses 520–532, Dexterity +30, Movement Speed +30, Balance +20, Radiant Flame Explosion (Rank 12), Scorching Holy Smite (Rank 12)

Restrictions: Holy Mage

Yao Yao immediately popped into Nie Yan's mind. The

Intelligence requirement for Ina's Prayer Gloves were a bit steep, so she probably couldn't equip them yet. But even if she wasn't Xie Yao, he couldn't think of a better owner for this item. Besides, equipment was meant to be worn.

Nie Yan teleported back to Calore and got into contact with Bird Leaves No Eggs.

「Boss, what's up?」Bird was in the middle of concocting potions.

「Who are our top Tinkerers?」Nie Yan asked. He wanted a skilled Tinkerer to learn Dela's Magical Device Book, so they could craft items exclusively for him.

Dela's Magical Device Book was a Legendary item. He would only give it to a Tinkerer who was loyal and trustworthy.

「Tinkerer?」Bird blurted out in surprise, wondering what Nie Yan wanted with a Tinkerer.「The Starry Night Tinkerer Shop currently has over 60 contracted Tinkerers. Among them, there are 3 Advanced Tinkerers, 5 Intermediate Tinkerers, and the rest are Junior Tinkerers.」

「Who are the 3 Advanced Tinkerers?」

「Calm Root, Violet Mist, and Left Hand Attained the Dao,」Bird replied. Of the seven Advanced Tinkerers in Calore, three belonged to the Starry Night Tinkerer Shop! Nie Yan had personally sought out two of them while the third joined on their own accord.

Nie Yan's heart shook. All three were famous Tinkerers worth well over ¥100,000,000 in the previous timeline. They were legendary existences that could rally tens of thousands with a single call. Even items casually crafted by them in their spare time would be fought over by countless players!

They were currently only Advanced Tinkerers. Even though they ranked among the top in their profession, their influence still wasn't that great.

It would be impressive if you could recruit even one famous

Tinkerer. These three represented almost half of the top Tinkerers in Calore.

「Let them know I'm looking for a personal Tinkerer. I naturally won't be stingy with benefits. But everything they produce is for Asskickers United alone, and they'll have to sign a contract,」Nie Yan said. Calm Root, Violet Smoke, and Left Hand, any one of them met his qualifications.

「Alright, I'll go talk to them,」Bird replied. He quickly ran over to the adjacent Starry Night Tinkerer Shop.

Both the Starry Night Potion Shop and Starry Night Tinkerer Shop were managed by Bird.

Inside a workshop of the Starry Night Tinkerer Shop, Violet Mist, Calm Root, and Left Hand were busy at work.

Violet Mist was an 18-year-old lass with her hair tied back in a ponytail. She had an adorable face with soft and supple skin. If she were out walking in the streets, it would be hard to associate her with one of the top Tinkerers in Calore.

Calm Root had the appearance of a 23-year-old woman with a slim build. Her skin was fair and delicate. She possessed a unique charm, appearing elegant in her beige tinkerer coat.

Violet Mist and Calm Root were chatting while working.

A slightly cold-looking youth sat off in a corner, completely absorbed in crafting an item. He was Left Hand Attained the Dao.

At this moment, Bird walked into the workshop.

“Drop what you're doing for now. I have an announcement. The boss is looking for a personal Tinkerer. Of course, you'll be generously rewarded. This is the contract I just drafted up. Take a look.” Bird showed the contract to Violet Mist, Calm Root, and Left Hand.

Calm Root frowned. No matter how she looked at it, this contract

was akin to a wealthy man lavishing gifts on a younger woman. The contract owner promised crafting materials and design schematics in return for everything the contractor produced. Nevertheless, the salary was quite decent at ¥20,000, with opportunity for raises in the future. These were generous terms for an Advanced Tinkerer.

Left Hand glanced at the contract with disinterest before returning to his work.

Violet Mist was tempted. ¥20,000 truly was generous. But it was precisely this generosity that made her wary.

Ever since they joined the Starry Night Tinkerer Shop, the identity of the owner remained a complete mystery, only knowing that he was low-key and never showed his face. They were curious about him, but that was about it. They figured he was probably an employee of some financial group.

Bird grew anxious after no one stepped forth. How could he face Nie Yan if he couldn't even complete a trivial task like this!?

“Violet Mist, what about you? are you willing to become the boss' personal Tinkerer?” Out of the three of them, Bird was the closest with Violet Mist. She was lively, energetic, and easy to get along with. Calm Root's beauty made her difficult to approach, not to mention she was around the same age as him. His interactions with her were limited. As for Left Hand, this fellow was so engrossed with work that he barely talked to his own colleagues, let alone others.

“Big Brother Bird, who is our boss?” Violet Mist asked. She was worried the owner might have malicious intents.

“Our boss is Mad Rogue Nirvana Flame,” Bird revealed.

Violet Mist's eyes widened in shock. She asked in a disbelieving tone, “Big Brother Bird, are you for real? Our boss is the guild leader of Asskickers United, Mad Rogue Nirvana Flame?”

Even though Violet Mist knew the Starry Night Potion Shop was collaborating with Asskickers United, never in her wildest dreams did she think their mysterious owner was actually Nirvana Flame!

The Starry Night Potion Shop was a flourishing business with branches in every city across the Viridian Empire. Asskickers United was the unshakable overlord of Calore.

Both of these entities were actually owned by the same person! What revelation could be more shocking than this!?

Even though they had their suspicions, they never dared to entertain the possibility.

Calm Root was reeling in shock. Left Hand, who had retreated back into his corner and was known for his indifference regardless of the situation, trembled and nearly dropped the metal component he was fiddling with.

It turned out the owner of the Starry Night Potion Shop was one of the most influential players in Conviction.

“Mad Rogue Nirvana Flame, he’s a legendary figure in Calore. Big Brother Bird, which financial group does he belong to?” Violet Mist asked. In her opinion, Nie Yan was definitely part of a financial group. How else could Asskickers United rise from obscurity to become the ruler of Calore in such a short time?

Calm Root was also curious. She awaited Bird’s response with anticipation. If it turned out Nirvana Flame had the backing of a financial group, there would be nothing to be surprised about.

“He doesn’t belong to any financial group. The boss started out from scratch. I first met him when he was still a solo player. He established the Starry Night Potion Shop first. Later on, he founded Asskickers United with several of his friends. Their rise to glory was nothing short of a miracle, always coming on top even when things looked grim!” Bird’s expression was filled with reverence. From starting out with nothing to contending for

hegemony over the Viridian Empire, the story of his boss was extraordinary.

Kiln Fire Woods, Sinful Gorge, and the plains outside Glory City, every battle was a classic!

Nirvana Flame's story would last for a long time to come, never to be forgotten by the countless players of Conviction!

Nirvana Flame was revered as a god!

"Big Brother Bird, I'll go!" Violet Mist said. She was incredibly excited to meet such a legendary existence.

Calm Root and Left Hand were much more level-headed. Bird basically wanted them to enter into what amounted to a slave contract. Their freedom would be severely limited, and they might not even make as much as they currently did crafting and selling Tinkerer items every day.

"What I revealed to you guys today is confidential. Got it?" Bird solemnly said. He inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. Since he managed to convince Violet Mist, he wouldn't have to go back to Nie Yan empty-handed.

"Yes." Calm Root nodded in agreement. Nirvana Flame truly kept a low profile. Even up until now, players were still unaware he was the owner of the Starry Night Potion Shop.

Left Hand also nodded.

"Let's go, Violet Mist."

"Mhm!" Violet Mist vigorously nodded. Her cheeks were rosy red. She looked quite adorable.

Suddenly, Bird felt like he was a dirty uncle selling his young niece into slavery.

The two walked out of the workshop.

Chapter 332 – Brothers!

Nie Yan knew it would take a while for Bird to get back to him, so he checked the situation in the forums in the meantime. The discussion had already reached a tipping point. Due to the war between Asskickers United and Bloodlust Blades growing increasingly intense, the moderators intervened and placed the kill counters next to each other on a stickied post. Since the data was obtained from the system, there was no misrepresentation.

With the official website getting involved, the numbers were 100% accurate!

Bloodlust Blades originally led Asskickers United by over 2,000 kills with their kill counter surpassing 8,000 kills. But after Asskickers United's bounty notice circulated around, the gap was shortened to just 300 kills. The biggest contributor to this reversal was the Union of Assassins, which accounted for around 4,000 kills. From this, it was clear they were a force to be reckoned with.

The conflict was far from reaching a conclusion. Bloodlust Blades increased their bounty reward to 3 gold, for fear of Asskickers United making them lose face by surpassing them.

This was Bloodlust Blades' only strategy to level the playing field.

For the sake of reaping some rewards, more and more ordinary players participated in this conflict between Asskickers United and Bloodlust Blades.

This was the so-called, the law is powerless in the face of the masses! Even though Asskickers United was the local hegemon, they were merely a drop in the bucket compared to the entire population of Calore. The reward of 3 gold was simply too tempting. With so many players fishing in troubled waters, Asskickers United couldn't possibly retaliate against all of them!

The players of Asskickers United were still feverently discussing

today's events in the guild chat.

「Boss, should we also increase the bounty reward?」

「Watchful Snail, can you ask Nirvana Flame if we should match Bloodlust Blades'? 」

...

Nie Yan showed himself in chat.「Calm down, guys. Bloodlust Blades upping their bounty reward is a sign they're losing confidence. Even if they were richer, I refuse to believe they can outlast us while hemorrhaging gold at a 3 to 2 rate. We won't raise our bounty rewards! We'll continue going at it with them and see who collapses first! Brothers, Asskickers United never falters!」

Nie Yan's words raised the spirits of the guild members. What was there to be afraid of? With so many brothers, even if the sky were to collapse, they would shoulder the burden together!

「Let's continue gold farming!」

「Hell yeah! Let's bankrupt those bastards!」

...

Nie Yan contacted Guo Huai.「Did the gold from the Dragonsoar Financial Group arrive?」

「Yep, the 100,000 gold was delivered to our account. They even gave us an additional 60,000 gold, no strings attached,」Guo Huai said with a knowing smile. Why would the Dragonsoar Financial Group show such support? There was obviously something going on behind the scenes! Did Nie Yan succeed in wooing that girl Xie Yao?

「I see... How are our losses?」Nie Yan asked. A thought surfaced in his mind. If Yao Yao really was Xie Yao, she would definitely help out after knowing the guild was in dire straits.

「Over 30,000 gold,」Guo huai replied. The bounty rewards only accounted for a little over half of that sum. The rest was spent on

helping those who died to ambushes. Even though many guild members outright refused compensation, not everyone could afford to ride out this storm by themselves.

In such a short amount of time, Asskickers United had already lost 30,000 gold, and it would only get harder from here on out. Nie Yan still had a large variety of money-making methods in mind. It was about time he decided which one could net the greatest profit in the shortest amount of time.

「Do you have an estimate of Bloodlust Blades' losses?」Nie Yan asked. He figured Guo Huai probably had a rough understanding of their situation.

「Probably somewhere in the ballpark of 50,000 gold. The guild members in Bloodlust Blades are demanding heavy compensation, and they're hemorrhaging gold even faster after raising their bounty rewards,」Guo Huai replied. It was impossible for Bloodlust Blades to be as united as Asskickers United.

Nie Yan always followed a certain set of policies to build as much goodwill as possible with the players under him, such as never reducing their benefits under any circumstances and aiding them whenever they were in a pinch. He hoped to lead by example and create a guild with a strong sense of comradery.

Asskickers United was widely-known to provide their players the best benefits out of all the major guilds. On top of this, Nie Yan, Guo Huai, and the other higher-ups were easy-going and approachable, which made them well-liked by the players under them. So when the guild encountered a calamity, everyone was willing to pitch-in.

On the other side, Bloodlust Blades was bloated with over double the members of Asskickers United. Outside of the investment they received from the Century Financial Group, they didn't have many other sources of income. How could they compete with a tycoon like Nie Yan? They regularly changed their benefits policy to cut

costs, which was one of the reasons for their many ongoing internal struggles. Those who had complaints with the guild could be found everywhere. When everything around them was burning, who would be willing to give it their all for nothing?

「How much gold do you think they have in reserve?」Nie Yan asked. This piece of information was vital for predicting the course of this war. For every 30,000 gold Asskickers United spent, Bloodlust Blades would lose 50,000 gold. If they could guess roughly how much gold the other side had, it would be easier to make adequate preparations.

「At least 300,000 gold. They wouldn't dare to provoke us otherwise. Furthermore, for the sake of destroying us, the Century Financial Group will definitely invest more gold!」Guo Huai thought for a moment, then continued,「The Dragonsoar Financial Group probably can't amass gold as quickly as the Century Financial Group. After all, the Century Financial Group has deep roots since they've been in the virtual reality game market for a long time. The Dragonsoar Financial Group is bound to be inferior to them in some respects. As for the rest, we'll have to wait and see.」

The Starry Night Potion Shop, Union of Assassins, and the Super Trade Channel were all incredibly profitable. The one to collapse first might not be Asskickers United but rather Bloodlust Blades! Nie Yan didn't particularly mind engaging this conflict with Bloodlust Blades because their backer was the Century Financial Group whose financial resources were robust. If the Century Financial Group were allowed to develop their business in Conviction without a hitch, they would pose a fatal threat to him. This was why he begrudgingly paid a heavy price to weaken them. In any case, his auction houses, shops, and properties would continue to generate gold for him.

With so many sources of income, Asskickers United wouldn't lose!

「Let me show you something.」Guo Huai shared an image.

It was a record of the guild's finances. There was currently a balance of 190,000 gold followed up by a long list of contributions.

Paladin of the Elegy has donated 7 gold.

Radiant Scroll has donated 3 gold.

Falling Leaf Flying Snow has donated 5 gold.

Aqua Smoke Stub has donated 329 gold.

Undying Scoundrel has donated 129 gold.

Blowhard Summer Bug has donated 157 gold.

Asskickers United Gold Farming Squad #1 has donated 2,832 gold.

Most Kickass Gold Farming Squad has donated 3,289 gold.

...

Nie Yan's mind turned turbulent like a stormy sea. Behind these contributions was the blood and sweat of his guild members!

It was impossible for Nie Yan not to feel deeply touched. Regardless of whether the contribution was large or small, he knew this gold came from players who had been saving up for a long time or was recently earned from farming.

None of their feelings were lost on Nie Yan. He heard them loud and clear. He didn't know how many players such as these there were. But if they accounted for even 10% of the entire guild, Asskickers United would never fall!

Chapter 333 – Dark Portal

Nie Yan's auction houses and shops generated a lot of gold. Combined with the numerous contributions of the guilds members, Asskickers United could persevere for a long time. Thanks to recent events, the profit of the Union of Assassins took a sharp decline since the professional players would rather be participating in the bounty notice than carrying out regular missions. Calculating everything, he earned roughly 50,000 gold a day.

「Guo Huai, I want you to note down all their names. When this war is over, we're going to reward them properly. They're the lifeblood of Asskickers United!」Nie Yan said. The loyalty these players displayed far exceeded that of ordinary guild members. Of course, their effort didn't go unnoticed. He planned to grant them benefits befitting of their merits.

At this moment, Bird walked over to Nie Yan with a girl in tow. She was quite cute.

Nie Yan glanced at the young lady, and she stared back at him with an inquisitive gaze. Her eyes were bright and full of spirit.

Violet Mist gazed at Nie Yan. He looked just like the figure she saw in the videos online. This was Mad Rogue Nirvana Flame!

“This is Violet Mist. She's willing to become your personal Tinkerer. She's one of our Advanced Tinkerers,” Bird said as he introduced Violet Mist to Nie Yan.

Nie Yan nodded in acknowledgement. Violet Mist looked no older than 18 years old. It was hard to believe someone so young would become a renowned Tinkerer worth over ¥100,000,000 in the future. Even though he was a little surprised, he had seen many young talents by now, so he didn't show too much of a reaction.

“Have you shown her the contract?” Nie Yan asked. Most players

wouldn't be willing to be bound by such a stringent contract, but the benefits he offered in return were ample. Just his name alone was a big attraction, to say nothing of the fact that he planned to invest an immense amount of resources to foster his personal Tinkerer.

"Yes, she's already signed the contract," Bird replied. Even Bird didn't know what Nie Yan's goal was.

Nie Yan turned to Violet Mist. "Since you've decided to become my personal Tinkerer, I'm sure you've read through the contents of the contract, including the confidentiality clause."

Seeing Nie Yan's solemn expression, Violet Mist became flustered. The person before her was the legendary guild leader of Asskickers United, Mad Rogue Nirvana Flame! She felt immense pressure.

Who hadn't watched videos of Nie Yan's feats online? He was a heaven-defying figure who commanded her respect. Add this to the fact that she just found out this person was her boss, and it was no wonder she felt nervous.

"I understand." Violet Mist vigorously nodded.

Seeing Violet Mist's flustered appearance, Nie Yan chuckled. "I'm not some scary monster. No need to be so nervous. Just abide by the terms of the contract and you'll be fine."

A young lady like Violet Mist was still pure. She was much more trustworthy than those sly foxes who bounced from guild to guild.

"Here, take this." Nie Yan handed over Dela's Magical Device Book. "I'll provide you with all the necessary materials. You'll be crafting the items described inside this book, specifically the Magic Bombs. I need a lot of Intermediate Magic Bombs, the more the better!" With a large supply of Magic Bombs, a lot of problems could be easily resolved, such as raising the levels of the players in the guild.

The materials required to manufacture Magic Bombs were fairly cheap, at least compared to the price of buying Magic Bombs from NPCs. Nie Yan still felt deeply pained when he recalled how much gold he spent on them.

Violet Mist curiously flipped open the book Nie Yan handed her, whereupon her eyes widened in shock.

This was a Legendary-grade Tinkerer Manual!

Just where did he get this!? Violet Mist was blown away. But on second thought, she felt this wasn't all too strange. After all, Nie Yan was the guild leader of Asskickers United.

“Work hard. I hope you'll meet my expectations. If your performance is good, I'll give you a raise,” Nie Yan said. Most production class players didn't come from wealthy backgrounds. Since crafting professions were generally monotonous and boring, the vast majority of players who selected them did so to earn money. Those who could earn salaries like Violet Mist ranked among the top of their respective professions.

Violet Mist hastily nodded. “I won't let you down!” As a high schooler, it was amazing she could earn such a salary by playing Conviction. Even her parents would be shocked. She naturally wouldn't pass up on such a lucrative job.

“I'll leave you guys to it.” Nie Yan bid farewell after explaining the relevant affairs.

Bird called for someone to prepare the necessary crafting materials for Violet Mist.

Nie Yan wondered about Violet Mist's production output. As an Advanced Tinkerer, she should have no problem manufacturing several dozen Magic Bombs a day. He could let them accumulate for a few days, then use them all at once to level up.

Bird led Violet Mist away.

Nie Yan had a headache trying to think of a method to earn gold

quickly. Doing quests was out of the question. Even the most difficult ones within the scope of his abilities would only reward him around 50 gold. Such a pitiful amount was like trying to douse a house fire with a cup of water.

Nie Yan reshuffled a few things in his auction houses and shops. The Level 50 dungeon, Roth City, was going to be released in a few days. He had his subordinates stock up on items he knew would be in high demand. With six auction houses, his hoarding ability was unmatched. After the release of every new dungeon, he made a profit of thousands to tens of thousands of gold.

The war with Bloodlust Blades didn't show any signs of ending soon. It might even drag on for over a week. Nie Yan felt confident Asskickers United could last for 10 days. He didn't know if the other side could do the same.

Nie Yan went off and explored some secret areas in high-level maps, obtaining rare items which he listed up for sale in the auction house. He also spent a lot of time running around in the wilderness hunting for treasure chests. This was his way of earning a bit of extra gold while also conveniently training his Lockpicking Specialist skill.

While Nie Yan was in the middle of treasure hunting, the Dark Portal from Bennett's Journal was about to open.

The Dark Portal opened once every five days and only lasted 20 minutes. Nie Yan would have to wait another five days for it to open again if he missed it. He pondered for a long time. Should he go and visit the Underworld? He might even make some unexpected harvest. It was also a good opportunity to earn a lot of gold!

Nie Yan finally came to a decision. He would have Sun retrieve the next fragment of Sulgata's Shadow while he took a trip to the Underworld. The territories of the two factions were in the same dimension, so he could still remotely direct things back in Calore.

「You want to go to the Underworld!？」Guo Huai blurred out in shock after Nie Yan informed him of his plans.

「Yes, I'm going to the Underworld,」Nie Yan said decisively.

「When will you be back?」Guo Huai asked. He was worried something might happen during Nie Yan's absence.

「Five days.」

「That long?」Guo Huai frowned.

「Keep the bounty notice up. We can hold out for at least a week and a half. Don't fret, nothing will happen. Even if Bloodlust Blades keeps making taunts, tell our brothers to stay calm. With the way things are developing, we'll definitely be the ones to come out on top!」

「Alright.」Guo Huai nodded. He should be able to manage the situation by himself for the next five days.

「Help me get a few bags, the bigger the better. Ask the brothers in the guild chat. I want the largest bags!」Nie Yan said. Since he was going to be staying in the Underworld for the next five days, he would need to stock up on plenty of consumables. Besides this, the more bag space he had, the more items he could bring back.

「I'll get right to it!」Guo Huai said. He began asking in the guild chat for large bags. As a guild full of elites, the players from Asskickers United regularly obtained bags from levelling and dungeon runs.

The players in the chat replied in droves when they heard Nie Yan needed bags with a lot of slots.

「How large of a bag does the boss need?」

「I have a 30-slot bag.」

「How could a 30-slot bag be good enough for the boss!？」

「I have a 36-slot bag!」

「I also have one!」

「I have a 40-slot bag!」

...

Guo Huai compensated the players who donated their bags with an equivalent value of merit points. After tallying everything up, he collected two 40-slot bags and two 36-slot bags. They were the best bags available at the current stage of the game!

After finding how many bags Guo Huai collected, Nie Yan quickly whispered him,「That's enough, I already have a 40-slot bag on me as well. Deliver everything to my personal storage.」

Before long, Nie Yan received the bags Guo Huai sent over and switched out his old bags.

Nie Yan stocked up on a ton of consumables, including some necessary scrolls. His Combat Medic skill had also ranked up.

Combat Medic (Advanced)

Requirements: 10 Runic Cloths

Description: Craft Advanced Combat Bandages which can be used in the middle of combat. Each bandage replenishes 200 health every second for 10 seconds and cannot be interrupted for the first 3 seconds. (Cooldown: 5 minutes)

Nie Yan bought enough Runic Cloths to craft three full stacks of Advanced Combat Bandages, which should be enough to last him five days.

Aside from the Combat Bandages, Nie Yan filled all five of his bags with full stacks of consumables. Out of the 172 slots in his inventory, only 5 were left empty. He definitely had to leave some empty space; otherwise, he would be forced to throw stuff away to make space when he found valuable items in the Underworld.

After settling his affairs in Calore, Nie Yan found a secluded corner and opened the Dark Portal.

A portal emerged in front of Nie Yan. It emitted a dark energy that appeared to pierce through space.

This Dark Portal led to the remote Underworld!

As Nie Yan gazed at the portal, a mysterious force guided him. He lifted his foot and stepped inside. The surrounding space trembled as his figure disappeared into the Dark Portal.

Chapter 334 – Underworld

“Violet Mist, all the materials are here. The boss has some matters to take care of, so he’ll be back in 5 days. During this time, manufacture as many Magic Bombs as possible, especially the Intermediate-ranked ones!” Bird instructed. He had tasked his subordinates to gather enough materials for over a thousand crafting attempts, the cost of which nearly made him keel over. A single Junior Magic Bomb had a material cost of roughly 1 gold. But this paled in comparison to the 15 gold material cost of an Intermediate Magic Bomb. He had only managed to secure enough materials for 30 Intermediate Magic Bombs. Like this, 1,500 gold went down the drain. He felt spending so much gold on crafting material was a waste, especially when finances were so tight. However, Nie Yan’s orders were clear, so he would naturally carry out his task to a tee.

As the average level of the player base rose, so would the number of players using Magic Bombs. Tasoyi Village had already become a player hotspot, so the Junior Magic Bombs sold there regularly ran out of stock.

A Junior Magic Bomb would sell for 5 gold or higher in the auction house. Advanced Tinkerers were capable of manufacturing 200 Junior Magic Bombs a day. Subtracting the material costs, this was a net profit of 800 gold!

This was the most lucrative business Nie Yan could think of for the time being, so he wasn’t stingy about the material costs. Even if he kept more than half the Junior Magic Bombs for himself and put up the rest for sale, he would still make profit!

Violet Mist’s personal workshop was filled to the brim with crafting materials.

“Violet Mist, work hard. If you perform well, I’ll let the boss know, so he’ll give you a raise,” Bird encouraged.

“Yes! I’ll do my best!” Violet Mist nodded. She gazed at the piles of crafting materials. It appeared she was going to be very busy for the next few days.

She got to work right away, her nimble fingers constantly moving as she produced one Magic Bomb after another.

Violet Mist was a talented Tinkerer. Bird nodded in satisfaction after seeing her completing Nie Yan’s task in earnest.

With news of the conflict between Asskickers United and Bloodlust Blades spreading to the four corners of the Viridian Empire, more and more players started participating in the bounty notices, the majority of whom were powerful experts. The ordinary players were lucky if they didn’t throw their lives away in vain attempts to take down a player from Asskickers United or Bloodlust Blades.

Since battles often occurred in Level 40 maps or higher, it was difficult for ordinary players to participate.

On the other end of the spectrum, some individuals even achieved kill counts of over 100, leaving the major guilds scrambling over each other to recruit them. However, they were extremely rare exceptions.

This kind of hectic situation probably wouldn’t end anytime soon.

...

Seven players were gathered together in a small house in the west district of Calore. They wore shabby equipment, except for the leader who appeared somewhat decent with a full set of Silver-grade equipment.

“Boss, Are you sure you want to go to Glory City? Why don’t we just hunt the Asskickers United players in Calore?” asked one of the players.

The leader was a short-haired man in his 30s with a slim build.

He wore ash-gray leather armour and carried two dinky-looking daggers. He was a Thief called King of the World.

“I agree. You have to pay 1 gold to teleport to Glory City. It’s too expensive.”

“We also don’t have much gold. After selling all the equipment in our storages, we’ve only managed to pool together 2 gold. That’s just enough for a round trip,” said a player with the appearance of a 20-year-old youth.

“A round trip costs 2 gold. If you fail to kill a player from Bloodlust Blades, won’t we go broke?”

“Yeah! We’ll be rewarded 3 gold for a killing a player from Asskickers United, and we won’t have to take any financial risks,” persuaded another player.

King of the World turned to the Priest beside him and asked, “Ol’ Three, do you know why I insist on going after Bloodlust Blades?”

“Why?”

“It’s because of Mad Rogue Nirvana Flame!” King of the World replied. “I studied his videos religiously to get to where I am today, so I consider him half my master. One other thing, the players from Asskickers United are far stronger than those from Bloodlust Blades. The safer bet is for me to go to Glory City. Even if we have to spend 2 gold, I think it’ll be worth the investment.”

With King of the World saying his piece, the others stopped trying to persuade him.

“Since you’ve made up your mind, I guess it can’t be helped.”

“We can’t accompany you there, so be careful.”

King of the World confidently smiled. “Even though it’s impossible for me to make a big splash, I should have no problem taking out the lower-ranking players from Bloodlust Blades. As long I can kill more than one, we’ll have made a profit, and this

trip won't be in vain."

King of the World gazed at the players in the room. They had sold all their old equipment to outfit him with a set of decent gear. For the sake of helping out these poor brothers, he would definitely give it his all. He accepted the bounty notice mission in the Union of Assassins. His goal was to assassinate two or more players from Bloodlust Blades!

Their group walked toward the transfer area.

King of the World was the strongest among them at Level 37. Everyone else was around Level 25. It was too big of a contrast. When they walked through the streets, players gazed at them with expressions of disdain.

With such poor equipment, they still had the face to show themselves in public?

"I'll be going." King of the World heartily laughed before stepping into the transfer point.

"Take care, Boss."

"Stay safe. We believe in you!"

Before they finished speaking, King of the World's silhouette disappeared into the transfer point. They felt a sinking feeling in their hearts, not knowing what the future had in store for them. Only a single ray of hope laid ahead. They prayed for his success.

...

The space around Nie Yan warped and twisted as he was transported to a completely new region.

It was a world without sunlight. Nie Yan found himself in a rocky wasteland with small patches of black vegetation scattered about. He gazed upwards. But instead of the sky, all he saw was an endless patch of darkness which gave off an oppressive feeling.

Thanks to the Night Vision +12 property of Empress Finas' Fate

Pearl, Nie Yan's range of vision was roughly 10 meters. Everything past this distance was pitch black.

The monsters in the Underworld had an extremely high chance of dropping Night Vision enhancing equipment. It was to the extent that every item here was almost guaranteed to raise the player's Night Vision by a minimum of 1 or 2 points. Such items were as prevalent as those that increased Strength, Dexterity, or Intelligence on the surface.

Night Vision enhancing equipment was extremely common in the Underworld. But on the surface, they were highly-valued and precious.

Generally, wealthy players in the Viridian Empire would keep one or two pieces of equipment that increased Night Vision in their bags just in case. However, due to the scarcity of such equipment on the surface, there was no set market rate.

Nie Yan could hardly imagine how much equipment with Night Vision +7, +8, or higher would sell for on the surface! It was bound to net him a massive profit. At the same time, equipment with other stat bonuses which were rare on the surface like Focus was also common in the Underworld.

Nie Yan wondered if there was a city nearby. He explored around and found spike-covered porcupines roaming around. Their bodies were silverish-gray, and they looked like giant hedgehogs.

Nie Yan snuck behind one of the porcupines and inspected it with Transcendent Insight.

Bloodthirsty Porcupine: Level 45

Health: 2,000/2,000

It was only a Level 45 monster which meant this area was a Level 45 map. The destination of the Dark Portal was random. Nie Yan didn't want to imagine the consequences if he was teleported to a Level 300 map again.

There were herds of Bloodthirsty Porcupines roaming everywhere.

Nie Yan pondered for a moment before summoning Lil' Gold.

Lil' Gold appeared before Nie Yan and greeted him with a puff of hot breath.

Nie Yan took out his Dullahan Cavalry Crossbow and fired at one of the Bloodthirsty Porcupines in the distance, immediately attracting the aggro of the entire herd.

The ground shook as dozens of Bloodthirsty Porcupines charged at Nie Yan.

At this moment, Lil' Gold sprayed out a mouthful of Dragon Breath, blasting the herd of charging Bloodthirsty Porcupines for over 700 damage.

Lil' Gold's Dragon Breath almost completely shrouded the Bloodthirsty Porcupines.

Nie Yan circled behind a Bloodthirsty Porcupine and stunned it with Smothering Strike. After which he followed up with Assassinate and Lacerate, shaving away almost all its remaining health.

Nie Yan no longer paid attention to the Bloodthirsty Porcupine and moved on to his next target.

The Bloodthirst Porcupine awoke from the stun and charged toward Nie Yan. But before it could even take several steps, it collapsed to the ground with a heavy crash, dying to residual burn and bleed damage.

The Bloodthirsty Porcupine's corpse dissolved into motes of light before completely disappearing.

Nie Yan had a chance of purifying an evil creature's corpse.

Purified: 1

In the blink of an eye, Nie Yan took down another Bloodthirsty

Porcupine.

At the same time, Lil' Gold breathed out another mouthful of Dragon Breath, bringing down the nearby Bloodthirsty Porcupines to low health. They rammed into him and knocked him back several steps. He immediately retaliated with a swipe of his claws, killing another one of them.

Chapter 335 – Glory Kills

Lil' Gold and Nie Yan quickly cleared the herd of Bloodthirsty Porcupines, littering the ground with corpses. Like the first one, each of their corpses dissolved into motes of light before disappearing.

Nie Yan checked the Holy Spirit Heart quest. He had purified a total of 56 corpses.

As long as Nie Yan continued purifying evil creatures, he could eventually unlock all seals on Zennarde's Sword. It was the best weapon he had ever seen, much better than those so-called godly equipment posted on the forums in the previous lifetime. When it was fully unlocked, its properties would be beyond astonishing.

Tyrant Abak's Set and Zennarde's Sword were the pinnacle pieces of equipment Nie Yan would work toward in this life!

Nie Yan had Lil' Gold tank at the front while he repeatedly cast Undead Rite from the back. He eventually caught five Bloodthirsty Porcupines: two ordinary, two Leader, and one Elite. Their damage was negligible, but they had high health and tough armour, making them decent meat shields.

Nie Yan continued to aggro herds of porcupines while using his meat shields to tank the damage. When one of them died, he would just capture another one.

The Dark Magic Effect +100% property of Finas' Fate Pearl greatly increased the potency of Undead Rite. Its success rate was much higher than before.

Nie Yan, Lil' Gold, and his five Bloodthirsty Porcupines swept away everything in their path, leaving a trail of corpses behind them.

「Ding!」Following a crisp jingle, Nie Yan lit up with a bright radiance and finally reached Level 37.

Nie Yan checked the level leaderboards. Tang Yao and Bloodlust Mad Blade occupied the top two positions at Level 53 and 52 respectively. They were practically neck and neck. Many players from Alliance of Mages and Divine Protectors were also quickly rising up in the ranks.

Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors only caught up on the leaderboards because of the nonstop conflict in Calore, leaving the players from Asskickers United little free time to level. However, Asskickers United still held an unshakeable position with 6 players in the top 10, and 27 players in the top 50.

Everyone's level was already so high. Nie Yan was truly a bit lacking in comparison.

I really need to catch up quickly, Nie Yan resolved. Afterwards, I'll find a town or village and ask around about the nearest city.

While Nie Yan was in the middle of grinding mobs, he noticed bright explosions of magic in the plains up ahead. It was activity from players of the Evil Faction!

I should go take a look first. It'll be troublesome if they discover me while I'm grinding here, Nie Yan thought before starting to make his way over there. He ordered Lil' Gold and the five Bloodthirsty Porcupines to continue grinding.

Nie Yan's body melted into the darkness as if he were a spirit of the night.

Nie Yan approached within 10 meters of the players. Several figures entered his vision. They looked completely different from anyone he'd seen on the surface, with pale white skin lacking a single trace of life, blonde hair, and incorporeal bodies.

This appearance... they're ghosts! Nie Yan inwardly exclaimed. It seems I'm in the Undead Empire... The class system of the Undead Empire was on the simpler side compared to other empires in the Underworld, comprising Dark Shaman, Spectral Knight, Undead

Raider, Dark Incantist, Necromancer, and Spectral Thief.

Out of these six classes, the Necromancer was the main force of the Undead Empire. With the ability to summon all sorts of undead creatures and monsters, they could deal just as much damage as a Mage.

Undead Shamans were similar to Priests in the sense that their primary job was healing. Dark Incantists were known as the most frightening class. They could render players helpless with debilitating curses and cast powerful magic.

Spectral Knights tanked in front with sword and shield similar to Fighters, while Undead Raiders were more offense orientated like Berserkers.

Last but not least, Spectral Thieves were quite notorious.

Among all Thief classes, undead and elven Thieves stood out above the rest. The former were experts at crowd control while the latter were experts at stealth, both of which were essential aspects for a Thief.

Furthermore, undead Thieves possessed the unique racial skill, Undead Will, which allowed the player to ignore Mind Magic to a certain degree. Even though its duration was short, it was quite useful in PvP.

This was exactly why players viewed the undead and elven races as the most suited for the Thief class. Humans were a close second thanks to their ability to disarm traps and use magical tools.

However, racial traits didn't determine strength, skill did. If you wanted to become genuinely strong, you would have to rely on your own ability; otherwise, it would be useless no matter what race you picked.

Nie Yan observed the six players from the shadows. Their group consisted of a Dark Shaman, a Necromancer, two Dark Incantists, a Spectral Knight, and a Spectral Thief. The Necromancer had

summoned a Skeleton Fighter. It wore tattered armour, supported a rusty helmet on its head, and carried a broken hatchet in its hand.

There were seven enemies in total.

Nie Yan activated Transcendent Insight. They were all around Level 45, which counted as above average among the player base.

This was Nie Yan's first encounter with players from the Evil Faction. He didn't know how skilled they were. Even though he had been to the Underworld in his past life, the place he visited back then was the Demon Tribe.

The Undead Empire and Demon Tribe were allied nations, just like the Viridian and Satreen Empires.

Nie Yan couldn't hear what they were talking about. Only after moving a little closer did he realize they were speaking in the Vanbiya Undead Language which was one of the main languages in the Undead Empire.

Thankfully, he had learned the Vanbiya Undead Language.¹ Otherwise, it would've been a pain for him to move around in the Underworld.

They were chatting about various topics. Nie Yan only heard bits and pieces of their conversation.

"Wily Six, what's the range of your Night Vision?" the Necromancer asked. He conjured up a black fireball in his palm and shot it at a Bloodthirsty Porcupine.

"65 meters, it's still too low to comfortably move about," replied the Thief called Wily Six.

"Hah... If I knew it would be like this, I would've bought that piece of equipment with Night Vision +12 for 30 gold," the Necromancer said in slight vexation. Too bad that ship had already sailed.

A piece of equipment with Night Vision +12 only costs 30 gold!? Nie Yan inwardly cried out in surprise. Such a piece of equipment would sell for upwards of 3,000 gold on the surface!

Their names were highlighted black, signifying they belonged to an enemy faction. Not only could Nie Yan freely attack them, but he also wouldn't be penalized with a red name for killing them. Instead, he would be rewarded with a Glory Kill.

A player in the Viridian Empire could receive military ranks based on their Glory Kills: 10-man Commander, 100-man Commander, 1,000-man Commander, 10,000-man Commander, General, Great General

A player with a military rank could enjoy special privileges such as purchasing a set from the Glory Sets Series at a reduced price. Of course, the sets which were available differed according to military rank. A General could purchase a Sub Legendary Glory Set while a Great General could purchase a Legendary Glory Set. Glory Sets generally had properties that focused on PvP.

Outside of the Glory Set Series, players with high ranks could also become a member of the Viridian Empire's parliament and take part in government affairs. They could wield enough power to shroud the skies. If Nie Yan could become a member of parliament, he would have dozens of methods available to squash Level 7 or lower guilds.

The higher the military rank, the better. However, you couldn't become a Great General just by mindlessly killing however many people. You would also have to complete SSS-grade quests. In the previous timeline, there were a few Generals and only a single Great General, who nobody knew the identify of. All people knew was that the Great General never revealed themselves in public. Generals and Great Generals were existences that had slaughtered countless enemies, both players and NPCs. They would be constantly pursued and surrounded by the enemy and still come out alive in a hopeless situation. They stood proudly at the

pinnacle of power!

Nie Yan wondered just how high of a rank he would reach by the time he unlocked all the seals of Zennarde's Sword.

There was no harm in trying to raise his military rank. Maybe he could really become a General or Great General.

Nie Yan locked onto the six players in front of him. In the wilderness, Evil Faction Players would generally use any means to kill their opponent.

Nie Yan had no enmity with these people. However, they belonged to different factions, so it was inevitable they became enemies. If they discovered him first, they would do the same.

Thinking to this point, Nie Yan ordered Lil' Gold and the five Bloodthirsty Porcupines to surround these six players.

"Wily Six, go pull some more mobs," the Necromancer said.

"Alright." Wily Six who was wearing ash-gray leather armour entered stealth, disappearing from sight.

Nie Yan looked around but he couldn't detect the position of Wily Six anymore. His Darkness Awareness was too low, and his range of vision was too small. He could only clearly see things within 10 meters of him. Everything past that was darkness.

In this sort of dark environment, Thieves were an extremely frightening class. Unless you had sufficient Darkness Awareness, you would be killed before you even knew what happened.

1. Nie Yan learned the Vanbiya Undead Language back in Chapter 167.

Chapter 336 – One Hit Kill

This was a world without light, and the Thief was the king of darkness who danced in the shadows!

“Ghost Wolf, do you feel anything off?” the Dark Shaman whispered in the Necromancer’s ear.

Ghost Wolf vigilantly swept his gaze across the surroundings but failed to find anything amiss, even after activating Undead Perception.

Undead Perception could detect the presence of nearby undead, which was useful in guarding against Spectral Thieves. However, the player targeting them wasn’t an undead but rather a human!

Their group had yet to encounter their first human. The Underworld was sealed off and rarely saw visitors from the surface. As for the one or two that did appear, they would be met with a quick death.

“Did you discover anything?” the Dark Shaman asked.

Ghost Wolf shook his head. “Nothing.”

“I guess it’s just my imagination.” The Dark Shaman thought he had detected a presence, if only for a brief instant. This fleeting sense of crisis left him feeling uneasy.

“No worries. We just have to stay on guard,” Ghost Wolf comforted. With the six of them, handling one or two Thieves would be a piece of cake.

Just at this moment, Wily Six sent a frantic message in the voice chat.「Guys, I discovered something strange. Hurry over here and take a look!」

Ghost Wolf and the others were flabbergasted. What could possibly be so strange to get Wily Six so worked up? They rushed to his side.

Nie Yan's heart trembled when he saw the direction they were headed. They discovered Lil' Gold! He followed closely after them. At the same time, he ordered Lil' Gold and the five Bloodthirsty Porcupines to act like regular mobs.

These undead players met up with Wily Six in a dense thicket.

"What do you think that is?" Wily Six asked after emerging out of stealth. He pointed at a chubby dragon in the distance. It was harassing the surrounding Bloodthirsty Porcupines, taking them down in only a few attacks. It appeared majestic with dazzling golden scales.

"Is that a dragon?" one of the players asked in surprise. Why did a dragon appear here of all places?

"It still looks young," Ghost Wolf observed. Adult dragons were usually the size of three-storey buildings or larger.

"What do we do?" Wily Six asked. "Should we kill it?"

"What level is it?" Ghost Wolf asked.

"I don't know." Wily Six shook his head. "I was too afraid to approach it, so I called you guys over first. If I'm in danger, Small Imp can rescue me." When he confirmed the monster up ahead was a dragon, he felt a bit anxious.

A dragon was simply too frightening!

The most powerful monster they had encountered so far was an Empress Medusa which had destroyed an entire village. However, a dragon was an even higher level existence, even if the one before them was only a fledgling.

Small Imp was the name of the Dark Shaman. He had a skill called Rescue Teleport which could teleport an ally from 40 meters away to the caster's side. It was a skill that only appeared in the Underworld. It had a cooldown of roughly 1 hour at Junior rank.

Wily Six was afraid of dying, so he called Small Imp over. In case

he encountered any danger when scouting the dragon, Small Imp could pull him out to safety.

“Go inspect the dragon. If you’re in danger, just call out for help and I’ll teleport you out immediately,” Small Imp said.

Wily Six nodded. He entered stealth and headed toward the dragon. He had faith in Small Imp. The six of them always played together, so their teamwork was impeccable.

Wily Six came to a halt 10 meters away from the dragon and activated Inspect.

Golden Dragon: Level 36

Health: 3,200/3,200

Wily Six was startled. Why is it so weak? He double-checked to make sure he wasn’t seeing things. Shouldn’t a Golden Dragon be at least a Lord or Elite?

「So, what did you find out?」Ghost Wolf asked in voice chat.

「It’s a Golden Dragon, but...」

「Hmm?」

「It’s only a Level 36 ordinary monster. What do we do? Should we try and kill it?」

Ghost Wolf was also bewildered. How could a Golden Dragon only be an ordinary monster?

“Let’s go for it!” Ghost Wolf decided. He could only think of one possibility; the Golden Dragon was an event mob! Maybe something special would drop after killing it.

The group of six started moving to surround the Golden Dragon. The Spectral Knight, who was at the front, slowly advanced with his shield raised.

Seeing their movements, Nie Yan instantly understood they were preparing to slay Lil’ Gold. This was precisely what he wanted!

Nie Yan ordered his five Bloodthirsty Porcupines to slowly encircle them. He was ready to take action the moment they attacked Lil' Gold.

The Spectral Knight let out a roar and charged at Lil' Gold.

Lil' Gold turned to face the oncoming enemy.

The Spectral Knight rammed into Lil' Gold with his shield and dealt 50 or so damage. Lil' Gold immediately retaliated with a swipe of his claws.

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The group was badly frightened by Lil' Gold's terrifying damage. Small Imp quickly healed the Spectral Knight.

"It's a melee-only monster. Everyone can attack freely," Ghost Wolf said. If this Golden Dragon had ranged attacks, it would've already used them long ago. Little did they know that it was actually someone's pet!

If the owner of a pet belonged to an opposing faction, it would appear the same as a regular monster.

This was why Ghost Wolf and the others believed Lil' Gold was just an ordinary monster.

As Lil' Gold's health gradually dropped, he followed Nie Yan's commands and slightly shifted his position so that the Dark Shaman was within the range of Dragon Breath.

That Dark Shaman called Small Imp was able to detect me earlier. He's the biggest threat. I should take him out first, Nie Yan thought.

The Spectral Knight and Skeleton Fighter were tanking at the front, while the Mages dealt damage from the back. The Dark Shaman provided support from the sidelines, and the Spectral Thief had circled around and started attacking Lil' Gold from behind. This was a standard battle formation.

While focusing on healing the frontliners, Small Imp spread out his senses every 10 seconds. Just at this moment, he felt a cold nip at the back of his neck.

Not good! A Thief! Small Imp inwardly cried out in alarm. He quickly protected himself with a Life Barrier.

「Bang!」Nie Yan struck the barrier, instantly shattering it.

Life Barrier could block one attack. However, it would shatter immediately afterwards, not to mention it consumed a lot of mana.

Small Imp quickly pulled back and waved his right hand. A cage of bones erupted out of the ground and enveloped him like a cocoon.

Small Imp's movements were pretty quick. He was no slower than players like Undying Scoundrel or Summer Bug.

Nie Yan was struck by some of the bones erupting out of the ground as damage values floated up above his head. He quickly retreated.

Small Imp was startled when he saw Nie Yan's appearance through the gaps of his protective bone cage. This Thief wasn't an undead but a human!

There was a human in the Underworld!

Nie Yan revealed a taunting smile. At this moment, Lil' Gold blasted the bone cage with Dragon Breath, causing flames to pour in through the gaps and turn it into a furnace.

Small Imp let out a blood-curdling scream and collapsed to the ground. It was an instant kill.

The bone cage could block physical attacks and ordinary single target spells, but it was useless against area-of-effect spells. This was the so-called, ensnared in a trap of one's own devising.

Even a single attack from Lil' Gold was fatal to these casters.

Small Imp was suddenly killed by the Golden Dragon? Ghost

Wolf and the others were dazed. Up until now, it had only been using melee attacks. Why did it suddenly use a ranged attack?

While they were still recovering from their shock, Nie Yan had already arrived in front of Ghost Wolf and slashed down with Zennarde's Sword which shone with a devouring light.

“Boss, be careful!”

“Careful!”

Wily Six immediately stopped attacking Lil' Gold and pounced toward Nie Yan in the hopes of intercepting him.

At this moment, Lil' Gold swiped down on the Spectral Knight with his tail and dealt over 1,200 damage. It was a critical hit! As an undead who didn't have much health in the first place, the Spectral Knight immediately collapsed to the ground. Without the healing from the Dark Shaman, there was no way he could tank Lil' Gold's ferocious attacks!

In the blink of an eye, two of their players were killed.

They were all skilled players. Unfortunately, the player they encountered was Nie Yan! They had fallen head first into his ambush. No matter how quick they reacted, they would die in a single hit!

Everything happened too quickly. There was practically no time for them to react.

In this moment, Nie Yan's five Bloodthirsty Porcupines finally arrived and started charging towards the remaining players.

Chapter 337 – Underworld Trip

Ghost Wolf and the others were dumbstruck. They never expected the surrounding Bloodthirsty Porcupines to also turn against them. Everything far exceeded their expectations.

Were these Bloodthirsty Porcupines also the pets of that Thief? They were like hills with legs as they thundered toward Ghost Wolf's group.

The four players were surrounded with nowhere left to hide.

There was no way they stood a chance against the lineup of a Golden Dragon and five Bloodthirsty Porcupines.

“Wily Six, save yourself. Go on without us,” Ghost Wolf anxiously ordered. The only player in their group who could escape was Wily Six. It was impossible for the rest of them.

“No! I won't go!” Wily Six solemnly declared.

“Y-y-you fool! Get out of here!” Ghost Wolf glared at Wily Six. If he delayed any longer, all of them would die here. What was the point of throwing his life away when he could survive?

Wily Six gritted his teeth. He entered stealth and slowly melted into the darkness.

At this moment, a Bloodthirsty Porcupine rammed into Ghost Wolf and sent him flying.

The five Bloodthirsty Porcupines under Nie Yan's control were far more terrifying than ordinary mobs. These cloth-armoured casters had no hope of surviving.

Bloodthirsty Porcupines normally didn't pose much of a threat. But after becoming Nie Yan's pets, they would move according to his will. They could flank, encircle, ambush, and use all sorts of battle tactics.

Ghost Wolf used a blink skill and reappeared over 30 meters

away, only to be greeted with another Bloodthirsty Porcupine. It launched a hail of quills which resembled steel needles toward him.

「Put! Put! Put!」Ghost Wolf was turned into swiss cheese as the quills pierced his body. A string of damage values floated up above his head, and he was also inflicted with the poisoned status effect.

Ghost Wolf collapsed dead on the ground. The remaining Undead Raider and Dark Incantist also failed to escape. One was trampled to death by the Bloodthirsty Porcupines while the other was incinerated by Lil' Gold's Dragon Breath.

Glory Kill! You have obtained 5 Glory for killing an enemy civilian.

Glory Kill! You have obtained 3 Glory for killing an enemy civilian.

...

The amount of Glory a player gained differed according to the strength of the opponent. An equal levelled opponent granted 1 Glory, a higher levelled opponent granted more, and a lower levelled opponent was worth nothing. If a downed opponent was revived in the middle of combat, a corresponding amount of Glory would be deducted.

Nie Yan gained quite a bit of Glory since his opponents were higher levelled than him.

Only the Spectral Thief remained alive. Nie Yan didn't know where that fellow ran off too, but he could still sense him in the vicinity.

Wily Six wasn't willing to just leave after his comrades were slaughtered. So he lurked in the area, waiting for the perfect opportunity to avenge them!

Nie Yan suddenly sensed something as he turned his head toward a certain direction.

Eye of Truth!

Nie Yan's eyes blossomed out with a mysterious light. His piercing gaze locked onto a silhouette in the darkness, whereupon he pounced forward like a bolt of lightning.

Shit! I was discovered! Wily Six was frightened by the sudden change in Nie Yan's eyes which made him resemble a demon. He immediately crushed a Haste Scroll and fled for his life. He knew he was no match for this opponent in a direct confrontation.

Despite Wily Six's best efforts, Nie Yan caught up to him in a mere 7 seconds and struck out toward the back of his head with Smothering Strike.

He's fast! Wily Six inwardly exclaimed.

Gale Step!

Wily Six avoided the stun with the initial seconds of invincibility from Gale Step as he activated all his speed buffing skills.

The two players were like cheetahs sprinting through the wilderness. No matter how much Wily Six increased his speed, Nie Yan kept up with him.

How is this guy so fast!? Wily Six was badly frightened by Nie Yan's speed. He was one of the top Thieves in the Night Empire guild. His amazing equipment and speed boosting skills allowed him to look down on all his peers.

But in front of Nie Yan, his speed became a joke.

When Wily Six recalled Nie Yan also had that Golden Dragon as a pet, he couldn't help but admit that this human Thief was truly astonishing.

Nie Yan was also somewhat amazed by Wily Six's speed. This Thief was actually quite fast. He had no choice but to activate Shadow Waltz, whereupon his speed immediately eclipsed that of this Spectral Thief.

Nie Yan closed the gap in an instant and stabbed Wily Six from behind with Backstab, causing blood to gush out like a fountain.

-737

What the hell! Wily Six was scared out of his wits. He had lost nearly half of his health in only a single attack. Just as Nie Yan was about to follow up with Lacerate, he drank an Intermediate Health Potion and turned around to parry.

「Klang!」The two daggers clashed.

The moment Wily Six parried the attack, Nie Yan slashed out with Zennarde's Sword in his other hand.

Vital Strike!

Wily Six had no time to react before a red line streaked across his neck.

Nie Yan's Vital Strike struck Wily Six's throat without the slightest suspense.

Wily Six's pupils fiercely contracted as he revealed an expression of disbelief. He had no idea how he died since he failed to see Nie Yan's movements.

His body limply fell to the ground.

Nie Yan bent down and picked up a piece of Gold-grade equipment with Dexterity +52, Strength +56, and Focus +7 from Wily Six's corpse. Unfortunately, it could only be equipped by players from the Evil Faction. After thinking for a moment, he put it away in his bag.

Nie Yan returned to Lil' Gold's side and collected the equipment Ghost Wolf and the others dropped.

He had to leave quickly or risk getting caught. These players probably belonged to a guild. He would be in danger if they sent a large force over for revenge. After all, he was all alone in the Underworld.

Nie Yan's journey in the Underworld had only just begun. He continued levelling with Lil' Gold and his Bloodthirsty Porcupines while trying to search for a village. During this time, he encountered around 70 players from the Evil Faction of whom only a few managed to escape from him.

He accumulated a ton of loot, the vast majority of which he discarded. He only kept a few pieces of equipment with decent properties in his bag for the time being.

Nie Yan was unrivalled. Legends of a powerful human Thief who massacred countless players began rapidly spreading in the Undead Empire. Weak players didn't dare to roam in areas with reported sightings of him, while experts began seeking him out and searching for his traces. Furthermore, the Mercenary Guild put up a bounty on his head.

Mission: Kill the human player, Nirvana Flame, that appeared in the Fesso Cold Wasteland.

Reward: 200 Gold

A 200 gold reward was quite tempting to many players. Some teams were even more eager to give it a try as they set out for the Fesso Cold Wasteland.

Most players didn't know Nie Yan's exact position. He emerged sporadically in different places, killing two or three players before disappearing. Otherwise, they would've long since hunted him down.

Although no one could locate Nie Yan, there were already players specifically tasked with collecting his information.

Nirvana Flame (Thief): Level 38

Health: 2,300

Equipment: Unknown, top quality weapons

Attack Power: 600–800, high critical rate

Highest Critical Damage: 1,700

Pets: Golden Dragon, Elite Bloodthirsty Porcupine, 2 Leader Bloodthirsty Porcupines, and 2 Bloodthirsty Porcupines.

These stats were quite shocking. Perhaps only a 20-man team could handle him.

Everyone in the Undead Empire wanted to see who would send this unwelcome intruder back to the surface and just how long he could last!

Before long, the day was over and it was about time to log off. Nie Yan glanced at the five Bloodthirsty Porcupines beside him. They would be gone by the time he logged back on. Even though it was a pity, there was nothing he could do about it.

Nie Yan unsummoned Lil' Gold and released the five Bloodthirsty Porcupines before logging off.

Nie Yan finished breakfast and made a trip to his father's company. The War God Tribe was able to get off the ground in part thanks to the 60,000 gold from Asskickers United. Furthermore, Father Nie invested a large amount of funds to absorb over 30 well-known gaming organizations. Just like in the previous timeline, their debut was as dazzling as ever. Not long after their establishment, they captured their first stronghold.

What Father Nie required was precisely strongholds. Their real world business districts were priceless. He could open recreational facilities, shopping malls, and so on. Players who didn't play the game like children and the elderly would visit these places for leisure. What's more, they paid to use these facilities with real world credits.

This was also why so many financial groups sought to invest in Conviction.

The War God Tribe had begun to expand their operations. The gold farming groups Father Nie employed were also starting to get

into gear. They no longer needed to rely as much on Asskickers United's support. Under Ah Chen's leadership, they could already start lessening the burden over on Nie Yan's side.

Nie Yan received a notice that the enrollment for the Top Military Academy would start in two hours. If he passed their evaluation, he could receive an acceptance letter from them in advance.

Such an important event would be attended by many people, including Xie Yao and Liu Rui.

In the previous timeline, Nie Yan had participated in the enrollment exams, but his performance was appalling. He still remembered the disappointed look on his father's face when he returned home. It was something that would forever stay in his mind.

Thinking to this point, Nie Yan couldn't help but let out a deep sigh. That was one of the many regrets in his past life.

Chapter 338 – Exam

Huahai University's Affiliated High School was bustling with activity today, with many unfamiliar faces walking around campus. Students from the various high schools in the region all flocked here to participate in the Top Military Academy's enrollment exam.

As humanity continued expanding outward towards the stars, the importance of fostering the new generation became increasingly clear. Anyone who could enter the Top Military Academy would be recognized by the government as a rare talent. Their status in society would be elevated, and they would receive special protections.

The Top Military Academy offered many courses also available in other universities, but with a focus on military affairs, science, and technology. Its position in the nation was unshakeable after producing many senior government officials. It wasn't mandatory for graduates to join the military, and just the prestige of being an alumni made many things in life much more convenient and straightforward.

Three girls were chattering near the underground parking lot entrance. They were students of Class 3, the same as Nie Yan and Xie Yao.

"I heard Liu Ze drives a Nisu. Don't those cost like ¥2,000,000?"

"Who knew Liu Ze's family was so rich?"

Expressions of envy surfaced on their faces. At this moment, one of the girls happened to catch a glimpse of Nie Yan stepping out of his Thrawn. She rubbed her eyes in disbelief. Even the cheapest model cost more than ¥20,000,000!

Just at this moment, an even more conspicuous car drove into the parking lot. With a sleek design resembling a fierce beast, it

was the Taiga Black! The eyes of the girls widened in shock.

Isn't that Tang Yao's car? Nie Yan mused when the Taiga Black parked right next to his Thrawn.

As if to answer his question, Tang Yao got out of the car.

"Tang Yao, you came too?" Nie Yan asked.

"I was forced to by my old man. He told me if I can get into the Top Military Academy, he'll help me out from behind the scenes and have a good job lined up for me when I graduate," Tang Yao replied, shrugging his shoulders in a helpless manner. He took advantage of this opportunity to take out his father's Taiga Black for a spin.

Nie Yan nodded in understanding. Tang Yao wasn't someone who spoke without thinking. His father really did possess this bit of ability. Sadly, his father was a businessman. At the end of the day, the status of a businessman could never compare with that of a government official. This was why his father wished for him to enter the Top Military Academy, making him the first to do so in their family.

"Let's go."

Nie Yan and Tang Yao chatted while making their way to the elevator.

"Isn't that Nie Yan from our class?"

"Who's the fatty next to him?"

"No clue."

"He was driving a Taiga Black. He must be really rich. There's only a handful of students in our school who can afford one."

The eyes of the three girls followed Nie Yan and Tang Yao until their figures disappeared behind the elevator doors.

"That Nie Yan is pretty low-key. He rarely ever talks. Who knew he drove a Thrawn."

“Too bad he only has eyes for Xie Yao,” the taller of the girls said in an envious tone.

“I wonder who the fatty beside him is.”

“I didn’t recognize him. Maybe we have a chance.”

Nie Yan and Tang Yao separated after passing through a long corridor since the exam area for students from other schools was held in a different area. Nie Yan swiped his identification card through the ID scanner to receive an examination number, then walked into the exam hall for Huahuai High School students. There were roughly 600 people inside.

Nie Yan looked around and found Xie Yao, Xia Ling, Zhai Hao, and his other classmates gathered off in a corner. There was also the unpleasant face of Liu Rui among them.

Xia Ling and Zhai Hao stood between Liu Rui and Xie Yao to stop him from pestering her.

Nie Yan suddenly felt this couple was too lovely.

Xie Yao appeared to be anxiously waiting for someone. A smile immediately surfaced on her face when she spotted Nie Yan walking over.

“You’re finally here! I was just about to give you a call,” Xie Yao cheerfully greeted.

Liu Rui’s face darkened after seeing Xie Yao’s expression turn bright. He balled his hands into a fist. He hated Nie Yan, wishing for nothing more than to beat him up. However, their match was still fresh in his mind. It had planted a deep seed of fear in his heart, and he simply couldn’t muster up the courage to confront him.

Nie Yan nodded at Xie Yao, then turned to Liu Rui with a friendly smile. “Oh! Liu Rui, you’re back! I’m truly sorry about what happened last time. I really thought you could handle that simple kick, but I ended up injuring you heavily instead.” He appeared

quite sincere. Those who didn't know him might actually believe he was genuinely remorseful.

Liu Rui subconsciously took a step back before recalling they weren't in the fighting ring. "It's nothing. I'm fine now." He awkwardly chuckled with an ugly expression on his face. He inwardly gnashed his teeth in anger. Nie Yan's words pierced his heart like daggers.

Nie Yan wrapped his arm around Liu Rui's neck and patted his chest. "Haha! You're right! We're all in the same class. We can't take such trivial things to heart."

Trivial? Is that what you call trivial, hospitalizing me for weeks? Liu Rui felt his blood boil at the heavy pats to his chest. He wanted to cuss Nie Yan out. But with Xie Yao and his other classmates present, it wouldn't look good for him if he turned hostile out of nowhere. He forced a smile on his face with great difficulty. "No problem. I've already put it behind me. It's my turn for the examination, I've got to go. I'll see you guys later."

Liu Rui pushed Nie Yan aside and hurried over to the examination area.

Nie Yan's lips cracked into a mischievous smile. Xie Yao looked at him with a hint of admonishment. How could she not see through his actions? However, she detested Liu Rui, so she didn't speak up.

Nie Yan, Xie Yao, Zhai Hao, Xia Ling, and their other classmates continued chatting.

A while later, Nie Yan and Xie Yao looked over toward the examination area. Liu Rui was starting his exam. His results were posted up in real time for all participants to see.

Punch Force: 230 kg

Kick Force: 260 kg

Squat: 320 kg

Lat Pulldown: 220 kg

...

Each of these results far exceeded the Top Military Academy's standards, causing the surrounding students to exclaim in shock.

"That's the strongest student in Class 3, Liu Rui. I heard he can compete with Class 7's Zhao Long. Amazing, he'll surely make it into the Top Military Academy."

"I heard the new transfer student in Class 3 is even stronger than Liu Rui."

"No way, right? That can't be true."

...

Liu Rui had endured a bit of hardship ever since his defeat to Nie Yan, using the best nutritional supplements and rigorously training every day. As a result, he rapidly improved in many areas.

Nie Yan and the others overheard these discussions. Zhai Hao walked up to Nie Yan and patted him on the shoulder. "Brother, when it's your turn, give it your all. I'm confident you're stronger than Liu Rui." Even though he knew Nie Yan was strong, so much so that he could defeat Liu Rui with a single kick, he didn't know to what extent.

Liu Rui's performance was a bit surprising. He was much stronger than in the past.

Nie Yan simply smiled, not bothering to waste words on that performance. Liu Rui's results were like child's play in his eyes.

Before long, it was Xie Yao's turn. Her results lacked far behind Liu Rui's. But as a girl, she had already passed the Top Military Academy's standards. The academic portion of the exam would also be a piece of cake for her.

Zhai Hao and Xia Ling both went to take their exams. Nie Yan and Xie Yao were left chatting together when several voices

entered their ears.

“There’s no point in waiting to see the remaining results. No one can beat Liu Rui’s.”

“Right, each one after is more disappointing than the one before.”

These students were intentionally speaking loudly. Liu Rui glanced over at Xie Yao from the other side of the exam hall. Since Nie Yan was there, he didn’t dare to approach.

Xie Yao frowned when she heard their words.

“It’s my turn. I’m going up. If I beat Liu Rui, you should give me a reward,” Nie Yan said with a playful smile.

“A-a reward? What kind?” Xie Yao asked with a hint of nervousness. Nie Yan’s smile caused her heartbeat to speed up.

Nie Yan’s words were a bit vague. He simply laughed and headed for the examination area.

Only then did Liu Rui dare to approach Xie Yao. “It’s Nie Yan’s turn? I hope he does well.” But in reality, he was waiting with giddy anticipation for Nie Yan to fail.

“Mhm,” Xie Yao gave a curt reply, then turned away to find her friends.

“My results weren’t that great today. I would’ve done even better if I was in peak condition. Xie Yao, are you entering the Top Military Academy too? We’ll be fellow students, then,” Liu Rui said while trying to gauge Xie Yao’s reaction.

Xie Yao gazed at the examination area with a hint of impatience. Liu Rui was just asking to be rebuffed.

Nie Yan walked into the examination room and was greeted by a familiar scene. He had taken this same exam in his past life and failed miserably. According to his memory, both Xie Yao and Liu Rui would enter the Top Military Academy. How could he not go!?

Nie Yan glanced at the punching bag in front of him. It was loaded with sensors that could detect the minutest changes in force.

Nie Yan took up a stance and breathed in deeply. “Hah!” His fist heavily struck the punching bag, causing it to fly up in the air as a loud pah reverberated through the exam hall.

Punch Force: 511.3 kg

The number on the screen immediately created a huge disturbance.

“What the hell? Impossible! The machine has to be broken, right?”

“Yeah, the machine is definitely broken. How can such a result be real!?”

Never once had a high schooler’s punch force reached such a frightening level.

A slim exam proctor walked up to inspect the machine. When he confirmed it wasn’t broken, he looked up at Nie Yan in shock. He signalled the other proctors to continue with the examination.

The machine wasn’t broken. Nie Yan’s punch force of 511.3 kg was a valid result.

Another commotion occurred.

“Shit, who is that freak?”

“I think he’s the new transfer student in Class 3, Nie Yan.”

“I heard he sent Liu Rui flying with a single kick and hospitalized him for weeks.”

“Did something like that happen?”

“What a terrifying fellow. With a punch force like that, he can compete professionally!”

“Keep watching. Let’s see how he does in the other tests.”

Chapter 339 – Freak

“Yao Yao, our families are long time friends. Uncle and Aunt wish to see us going to the same school, so we can look after each other. As for Nie Yan, he’s only a slightly skilled fighter. I only lost to him last time because I was too careless. Do you really believe he’s qualified to enter the Top Military Academy? I don’t think his character is good either. You should stop associating with him,” Liu Rui said as he glanced at Xie Yao.

Xie Yao’s expression distorted in disgust and loathing. She was fed up with Liu Rui’s constant badmouthing of Nie Yan in front of her. If it weren’t for the friendship her parents built up, she would’ve long since cut him out of her life.

“I don’t need you sticking your nose into my affairs. Look after yourself,” Xie Yao coldly replied.

“I’m only saying this for your own good,” Liu Rui said somewhat impatiently. He was irritated by Xie Yao’s cold attitude, but he understood she was the precious darling of both the Dragon Soar and Glory Financial Groups. He didn’t dare to imagine the consequences if he tried to lay a finger on her.

A short student with a crew cut approached Liu Rui and whispered, “Boss, the results for Nie Yan’s punch force are up.”

“How did he perform?”

“511.3 kg.”

“W-wait, what did you say?!” Liu Rui’s eyes widened in shock as an incredulous expression flashed across his face.

At this moment, a huge ruckus erupted in front of the examination area. The results displayed on the screen caused everyone to cry out in shock.

“Fuck! 511.3 kg? Is he still human?”

“Is he really only a high school student? He’d probably rank at the very top even in the Top Military Academy! I reckon as long as he passess the background check, he can graduate there two years early!”

“Shit! How are we supposed to compete with that? I can only hit for a little over 100 kg!”

“I bet he could send a person flying with that fist of his!”

Liu Rui had a vacant look on his face as despair seeped into his heart. If the difference was only 30 kg or so, he might still have some hope of catching up. However, Nie Yan’s punch force was over twofold that of his own!

Who was the real trash? Nie Yan’s results showed the best proof.

Xie Yao, Zhai Hao, and Xia Ling were ecstatic.

“Damn! That brat is too low-key. Who knew he was actually this amazing? 511.3 kg, is he even human?!” Zhai Hao exclaimed in disbelief.

“You can rest easy now. With that kind of result, he’s guaranteed to get into the Top Military Academy.” Xia Ling smiled. Just a moment ago, Xie Yao was grabbing her hand so tightly that it started to hurt. It was clear Xie Yao wished to go to the Top Military Academy with Nie Yan.

Xie Yao’s furrowed brows finally relaxed. After thinking for a bit, she realized that this level of exam was nothing to Nie Yan.

“What would you have done if Nie Yan failed to get into the Top Military Academy?” Xia Ling suddenly asked with a teasing smile.

“I would’ve followed him to whatever university he chose to go to,” Xie Yao replied without a hint of hesitation. She had long since thought this answer through.

Xia Ling gazed at Xie Yao for a long time before eventually letting out a sigh. “I see. Your family is so rich it really doesn’t make a

difference whether you go to the Top Military Academy or any other university.”

Just at this moment, there was another disturbance in front of the examination area.

“The rest of Nie Yan’s results are up.”

“What are they?” The surrounding students immediately perked up their ears. His updated results had yet to show up on screen, so most people still didn’t know.

Punch Force: 511.30 kg

Kick Force: 563.23 kg

Squat: 835.78 kg

Lat Pulldown: 582.21 kg

...

Nie Yan was an accomplished fighter in the previous timeline. The Top Military Academy’s exam was a cakewalk for him.

“My God. He could probably kill me with a single kick!”

“No kidding. A kick force of 300 kg can already directly break bone. If you took a hit in a vital area, you’d be dead!”

“How many years of training would I need to reach such a level?”

“This relies on talent and good genes. With a matchstick body like yours, you’ll never reach that level in a lifetime.”

Nie Yan instantly became the subject of heated discussion.

He was satisfied with his own results. With the first portion of the exam over, the slim exam proctor approached him with a smile. “Your results aren’t half bad. You’ll definitely pass on the physical fitness portion. The academic portion is up next. Let’s see if you have what it takes to enter the Top Military Academy as an Ace. My name is Li Yue. I’m one of the military instructors. If you have any problems, feel free to contact me.”

Nie Yan sized up Li Yue. He was quite short with a lean figure. For a person with this kind of build to be an instructor at the Top Military Academy was a little odd.

It was rumoured that the Top Military Academy accepted only around a dozen or so Aces every year. Anyone that could become one was recognized by the federation as an extraordinary talent. As long as you passed the yearly assessment, you would keep your special status. There was only one caveat—in the event of war, you would be drafted. During periods of peace, however, you were free to do as you pleased. Fortunately, war hadn't broken out in centuries.

“Yes! When will I be taking the academic portion of the exam?” Nie Yan asked. He had no intention of serving in the military after graduating from the Top Military Academy. However, the special status of an Ace greatly tempted him. He would be granted special privileges such as the right to carry a firearm. If someone posed a threat to him, he would be allowed to act first to neutralize them. He understood these kinds of favouring would always exist in the world. Rather than cry out about the injustices, it was better to grow strong enough so he could protect those he cared about.

In the previous timeline, Tang Yao was murdered by the son of a senior government official and his case ultimately remained unresolved. What use was hatred? What use was grief? If he had entered the Top Military Academy back then and graduated as an Ace, he could've prevented all of that from happening!

While Nie Yan was lost in thoughts, Li Yue's palm suddenly stabbed out toward his throat.

Li Yue's actions were decisive and ruthless. It didn't look like he was playing a joke.

Nie Yan finally reacted as he raised his left arm to block on reflex. 「Bang!」He suddenly felt a numbing sensation as a heavy blow struck his right arm.

Li Yue didn't stop. With a sidekick, his foot swept past Nie Yan's cheek.

"Hah!" Nie Yan shouted as he caught Li Yue's foot. He retaliated with a full strength kick to the chest which was capable of breaking at least a few ribs.

Li Yue quickly crossed his arms to block.「Bang!」He was sent skidding several meters back before regaining his footing.

Nie Yan didn't follow up. There was something strange about Li Yue's attacks. They were sharp but didn't carry any killing intent. Seeing that the exchange was over, he put his guard down.

At this moment, Li Yue looked over at the other exam proctors, who nodded in satisfaction.

"Alright, your examination is over. You've earned the qualifications to enter the Top Military Academy. As for whether or not you can become an Ace, that'll depend on the performance of your academics," Li Yue said.

Sure enough, Li Yue really was just testing him. Nie Yan bowed before leaving the examination area.

All the nearby students had witnessed this exchange. With expressions of both fear and reverence on their faces, they stepped aside for Nie Yan. This guy is crazy! He can even beat back an instructor from the Top Military Academy!

Nie Yan became a freak in their minds. His awe-inspiring display left them shocked and speechless.

It was the sudden emergence of a dark horse who could overlook all of them like a lofty god high atop the clouds.

Liu Rui learned about Nie Yan's performance from the students around him. He was left completely slack-jawed. Compared to Nie Yan, he was no better than refuse!

When Liu Rui spotted Nie Yan walking over, he glanced at Xie

Yao before quickly leaving with his tail tucked between his legs. Although he felt reluctant, he understood he would only be inviting further disgrace by staying around.

Nie Yan coldly stared at Liu Rui's retreating back. This fellow's fate was destined to be a tragic one after encountering him in this life. He wouldn't allow any chances for a comeback!

Xie Yao no longer had any trace of Liu Rui in her heart.

Zhai Hao walked up to Nie Yan and patted him on the shoulders. "Brother, I never expected you to be so strong! You have my admiration." When he noticed all the nearby students looking at Nie Yan with the same peculiar gaze, he laughed. "You've really put yourself in the limelight this time!"

Nie Yan and Xie Yao simply smiled at each other, sharing a mutual understanding that evolved beyond words.

"Let's all go celebrate together," Xia Ling proposed.

"That'll have to wait. I need to take the academic portion of the exam," Nie Yan said after looking at the time. He was informed by the military instructor, Li Yue, that the academic exam for Aces was going to begin in an hour. It was several times harder than the ordinary exam.

"What? Isn't that not for another five days?" Xia Ling asked in surprise.

"It's a different exam for those who want to become an Ace," Nie Yan replied. This exam was just for him.

"Ace...!" Everyone was completely stunned. It had to be understood that Huahai University's Affiliated High School had only produced two Aces in its over 100 years of history. From today forward, Nie Yan could become the third!

"Is it for commanding or interstellar travel?" Xia Ling asked. The Top Military Academy only had these two department for Aces.

“I don’t know yet.” Nie Yan shook his head. He wasn’t too interested in these things. His aim was only the privilege and special status brought by being an Ace. As for which department he would join, it made no difference to him. The last thing he wanted was to actually enter a real battlefield.

Chapter 340 – Drunk

Nie Yan walked out of the academic examination room and let out a long sigh of relief. The maximum score on this hour-long exam was 720 points. But the questions were so hard he'd be happy with just 500. There were even a bunch of concepts he knew practically nothing about.

“How'd you do?” Zhai Hao asked. He and Xia Ling had been fretting endlessly this whole time.

“I heard the benchmark for an Ace in both command and interstellar travel is 600 points,” Xia Ling added.

“Don't worry about it. If I get in, I get in. If not, so be it.” Nie Yan laughed off their worries. Getting into the Top Military Academy was good enough for him. Being selected as an Ace was simply too much to hope for. With the Top Military Academy's admission notice in hand, he could already be considered a part of certain powerful influences. Others would have to think twice before making a move against him, because acting against the academy's students would be provoking the Top Military Academy's prestige. Even if major consortiums had some background, they had to tread carefully around the academy. If they went too far, the academy's alumni could easily take them down!

This was the main reason he wanted to join the Top Military Academy. The identity of a student there would be an extra layer of security for him. His status alone would deter his enemies from using underhanded means to rough him up.

Nie Yan immediately informed his parents about his admission into the Top Military Academy. Father and Mother Nie were both ecstatic, especially his father. One of Father Nie's greatest regrets in life was not getting into the Top Military Academy. So, when he heard his son had succeeded where he had not, he almost burst into tears. At long last, he saw this dream of his fulfilled through

his son.

Nie Yan could clearly hear his father's voice quivering on the other side of the call. He thought back to when he got rejected in the previous timeline, and the utter disappointment on his father's face at the time. The contrast between the sad memory back then and the now-reversed situation filled Nie Yan with an indescribable emotion.

This time, he had no regrets.

Nie Yan joined his friends for a celebratory meal. They ate, sang, and drank heartily under the restaurant's red lighting. He and Xie Yao were both pushed into drinking more and more until they got more than a little tipsy.

After the meal, Nie Yan stared at Xie Yao. The alcohol flushed her skin, giving her cheeks an additional redness that only added to her charm. She didn't have an overcoat on, only a white wool jumper that perfectly accentuated her curves. She was like an enchantress who drew men's eyes wherever she went.

Including Tang Yao, there were nine of them there. Tang Yao had to leave early, but the rest of them kept having fun until around one in the afternoon. That was when four more people left, leaving only Nie Yan, Xie Yao, Zhai Hao, and Xia Ling. With just the four of them, the atmosphere suddenly became a lot more intimate.

Zhai Hao looked pointedly at Nie Yan before nudging Xia Ling and whispering, "Let's go. Nie Yan can take Xie Yao home. He's parked just downstairs."

Xia Ling looked meaningfully at Nie Yan and Xie Yao, a knowing grin on her face. "Alright, let's stop bothering these two lovebirds."

Zhai Hao and Xia Ling quickly made themselves scarce.

Nie Yan looked at Xie Yao, who lowered her head in

embarrassment and nervously pushed her hair behind her shoulder. The red light bounced off her face, creating a charming halo around her head. As Nie Yan looked at Xie Yao, he thought she couldn't be any less beautiful than the goddess Aphrodite.

"I'll send you home," Nie Yan offered with a courteous bow to his lady.

"Yes," Xie Yao answered, a little too quickly. She could feel Nie Yan's heated gaze on her as she became increasingly aware that the two of them were alone in a fairly small private room. How could she not be nervous?

Nie Yan's looked once more at Xie Yao in the dim light, his thoughts clouded by alcohol. His mind suddenly conjured a picture of that night with Yao Yao in the secret chamber under Fenarte. That exquisitely charming figure! Her beautiful jade-white body! Yao Yao's silhouette overlapped with Xie Yao's as he drunkenly entertained the possibility that the two were one and the same. His blood began to boil and an intense heat arose in his lower abdomen. The physical sensation abruptly snapped him back into the present.

"Xie Yao," Nie Yan whispered gently. He quietly slid one arm around her slender waist, holding her within his embrace. He could feel her body instinctively tense, lightly struggling against his touch.

A familiar feeling overwhelmed Nie Yan's drunken senses. It felt so distant, yet so close.

Perhaps it was the wine, but Nie Yan's mind became foggy with nothing but a loud buzzing noise. He hugged Xie Yao even more tightly and pressed her down against the couch. He leaned in toward her and pushed his lips on hers. Instantly, the buzzing fog was replaced with an overload of silky softness.

Nie Yan could think of nothing but that night as a primal desire filled his body.

Xie Yao hadn't known Nie Yan's feelings for her were so strong, and had no way to know how deeply rooted they were.

Everything happened too quickly. Xie Yao hastily tried to shove Nie Yan away with both hands, but she couldn't budge him at all. Nie Yan was far stronger than her in the first place, and her body had become soft and powerless the moment his arm circled around her.

Nie Yan's hand roamed her body, from her tall, perky chest to her thin, taekwondo-trained legs before slipping beneath her jumper and continuing to explore.

Xie Yao could feel Nie Yan's large hand exploring her every curve, but she still jumped when it made skin contact with her belly. As his hand continued to inch upwards, she began squirming in protest, but it was just a token resistance.

With no idea how far Nie Yan was going to take this, Xie Yao felt her heart race as her emotions bubbled turbulently within her.

The moment Nie Yan reached behind her smooth shoulder and touched the clasp of her bra, Xie Yao's struggles suddenly gained strength. Although her heart already belonged solely to Nie Yan, she wasn't quite ready to take the next step yet. It was just too soon.

The frenzied protest snapped Nie Yan out of his drunken haze. He instantly realized he had gone too far. Sitting up, he shook his head to try and clear it. Still somewhat dizzy, he looked at Xie Yao. Her clothes were a mess and her snow-white belly was still exposed.

Xie Yao hurriedly sat up as well and hastily straightened out her clothes. She felt extremely shy about what just happened. When she thought further to what might have been, she was too embarrassed to even look in Nie Yan's direction.

"...I'm sorry," Nie Yan sincerely apologized. The thought that

Yao Yao and Xie Yao might be the same person really had too big of an impact on him. If today's events offended Xie Yao and caused her to have a bad impression of him, he would never forgive his own stupidity!

With her face burning red, Xie Yao looked at him mutely for a bit before quietly saying, "Drive me home, please." She had been rather upset by Nie Yan's audacity, but she couldn't stay angry at him after seeing the sincere look on his face. Her discontent vanished completely after hearing his heartfelt apology.

"Okay." Nie Yan stood up.

Xie Yao fussed with her clothes one last time before standing up as well. As she stood, she felt a sudden weakness in her knees and almost collapsed back onto the couch.

Nie Yan immediately put his arm behind her to keep her from falling.

"I think I drank a little too much," Xie Yao said awkwardly. She couldn't muster up even an ounce of strength.

"Don't worry. I'll carry you to my car. I keep sobriety pills in the glove compartment," Nie Yan said. Once they took sobriety pills, the alcohol's effect would be gone in no time.

"No!" Xie Yao vehemently shook her head. It was the middle of the day, so there were bound to be people out and about. A strong guy carrying a drunk girl to his car in broad daylight would surely cause a large commotion.

Nie Yan twisted his neck to look at her swaying figure. After a moment, he smiled brightly at her before turning around to lift her into a piggyback ride.

Xie Yao let out a startled yelp when she felt herself rising into the air. Her heart raced in panic before quickly settling down again. For some reason, being supported by Nie Yan's sturdy back made her feel safe.

Nie Yan carried Xie Yao to his car. After both of them took a sobriety pill, they felt much better.

The two of them sat wordlessly in the car, creating a tranquil silence as they tried to avoid thinking about the embarrassing events inside the restaurant.

“Let’s go,” Xie Yao said softly. Even now, she had no idea how she could face Nie Yan ever again.

Nie Yan started his car and drove out of the parking lot. “Where do you live?”

“Cloudwater District.”

Cloudwater District? Nie Yan jumped in his seat. Wasn’t that where he lived? However, it made sense. Built around the lake with excellent view and refreshing air, Cloudwater was ranked the number one neighbourhood in Huahai. It had the largest concentration of wealthy elites in all of the city. Given Xie Yao’s background, it was no surprise her family lived there.

However, Cloudwater was huge. Since Nie Yan had never bumped into her in the previous timeline, he figured she probably didn’t live very close to him; otherwise, he would have definitely seen her at one point or another.

The congregation of wealthy families was the main reason Father Nie decided to settle in the Cloudwater District. He subscribed to the famous saying, Live near wealth, be near wealth. In fact, Cloudwater residents would often hold events exclusively for their neighbours. Being invited to these banquets was an incredible opportunity for the Nie Family because it opened the door to influential connections and wealthy contacts.

“Oh wow! I also live in Cloudwater.”

“Really?” Xie Yao asked in surprise.

“You should stop by my house to take a look sometime.”

“Alright. It’ll be a good chance to meet your parents as well.”

As Nie Yan and Xie Yao continued to chat, the car sped toward the address Xie Yao provided. It was just as Nie Yan had thought: she lived pretty far away from him. They lived on different sides of the lake, and even used different entrances to the neighborhood. Since one family used the South Gate and the other used the West Gate, it was no wonder they never came across each other.

Nie Yan stopped the car in front of Xie Yao’s house and watched her enter the front door before finally heading home.

When Nie Yan got home, he walked into his surprise party. His parents had invited friends and family for this grand occasion. They watched happily as everyone praised their son, proudly basking in his glory.

The lively festivities continued for two hours before the guests left.

Father Nie, still exuberant about Nie Yan’s acceptance, began talking about company matters with his son. As the Tuoba Family and Century Financial Group fought each other and both sides took hit after hit, he took the opportunity to use a large amount of capital to buy as many of Tuoba Hongye’s shares as he could. By now, Father Nie’s total capital was staggeringly massive, almost enough to be alarming.

Nie Yan thought it over. His father’s actions against Tuoba Hongye would also indirectly help Tuoba Time. It seemed as if the Tuoba Family’s problems were far from over.

“Say, son, what do you think we should do next?” Father Nie looked at Nie Yan and asked. He wanted to see if his son had any thoughts about the situation.

“The Tuoba Family suffered huge losses, but the Century Financial Group didn’t get off easy either. They’ve sponsored quite a few guilds in Conviction, and will probably be a major

competitor in the near future. Why don't we take this chance to grab some of their shares too? Perhaps, it'll come in handy one day."

Father Nie thought about it for a while before slowly nodding in agreement. Nie Yan's words made sense, but the specifics still required careful research and planning.

Chapter 341 – Devil Slayer

Nie Yan reminded Father Nie that the War God Tribe and Asskickers United would inevitably touch upon the interests of the Century Financial Group. It would be troublesome when such a big player took notice of them. So before then, it was crucial to prepare as many hidden cards as possible!

Father Nie left since he still had business to attend to back at the company. Nie Yan finished up dinner and headed upstairs to his room, where he put on his game helmet and entered Conviction.

When Nie Yan logged back on, he was greeted by nothing but darkness. This would continue to be an issue until he increased his Night Vision.

Players on opposite factions were barred from viewing each other's forums, so there was a veil of mystery between the two sides. The game developers added this to spice up the gameplay. However, players could still obtain information on the opposing faction through various other channels. During the server's downtime, the players from the Undead Empire had gathered some intel on Nie Yan.

It was impossible for Nie Yan's identity as the guild leader of Asskickers United to remain a secret. Furthermore, some of his videos had also been dug up and disseminated among the players of the Undead Empire.

Nie Yan's bounty was consequently raised to 500 gold. This was the limit for the players who died to him.

Nie Yan was all by himself, and even though he was a guild leader, he couldn't mobilize any of the members under him. 500 gold was a fair reward. It was enough to entice quite a few experts into tracking him down. After all, such profitable opportunities were few and far between.

Nie Yan naturally understood his own situation, which was why he never stayed in one location for too long.

Nie Yan still hadn't found a village this whole time. As he continued travelling west, a system notification popped up.

You have discovered Falling Gully.

Nie Yan was somewhat familiar with Falling Gully. Before travelling to the Underworld, he had searched up some information about the maps in the Demon Tribe and Undead Empire. He recalled that just a few kilometers from here was a village called Valitin Graveyard Village.

It had a transfer point connecting to the nearest city!

Nie Yan immediately started making his way through Falling Gully. There were piles of rubble everywhere. He saw Level 50 Miner Zombies and an occasional Elite Zombie Foreman roaming around.

Level 50 mobs were a bit difficult to deal with for Nie Yan. But before long, he successfully took control of four Zombie Miners with Undead Rite. He used them to capture a Zombie Foreman, losing three of them in the process.

The Zombie Foreman was a two meter tall hulk of rotting flesh. It was covered in chains and carried a large hammer. It was a bit slow since it moved with a limp, but it was quite powerful.

With one Zombie Foreman, capturing successive ones would be much easier. Nie Yan used Undead Rite to take command of two more. With Lil' Gold and three Zombie Foremen, his mobbing speed increased exponentially.

As Nie Yan swept through the monsters in his path, he suddenly received a system notification.

You have received the Junior Devil Slayer title.

A title advancement! Nie Yan quickly checked the properties of

his new title.

Junior Devil Slayer – Increases Influence in all human nations by 22. Reduces the stats of every creature of darkness within 20 meters of the player by 30%.

Extreme Intimidate: Inflict the target with fear, and cripple their movements for 5 seconds. Range: 5 meters.

Extreme Deterrence: Disperse all monsters within the surrounding area for 20 minutes. Not valid if the monsters' levels exceeds the player's level by over 30.

Divine Recruitment: Summon a Paladin mercenary whose stats are proportionate to that of the player. Requires an hourly fee. Cast Time: 30 seconds.

Rank 1 Paladin Inez: 60% of the player's stats

Fee: 10 gold/hr

Rank 2 Paladin Redmayne: 80% of the player's stats

Fee: 30 gold/hr

Rank 3 Paladin Clementine: 100% of the player's stats

Fee: 50 gold/hr

Rank 4 Paladin Fern: 120% of the player's stats

Fee: 100 gold/hr

Rank 5 Paladin Khalisi: 150% of the player's stats

Fee: 300 gold/hr

...

It went all the way up to a Rank 16 Paladin with an hourly fee of 500,000 gold. This kind of cost wasn't something an ordinary player could bear. These Paladins could buff the players with the most basic blessings. They also had basic attack, heal, and shield skills that corresponded to their rank. The only exception was the Rank 16 Paladin who could use high rank Templar Magic. If a hired

Paladin died, the player was required to pay 200% of the total fee.

Nie Yan was a little perplexed by why the Devil Slayer title gave such a skill.

Any holder of the Devil Slayer title was undoubtedly a heaven-defying figure. Outside of pursuing balance, Conviction also generously rewarded the truly powerful. This was because when the federation first created the game, besides using the game helmets to enhance humanity's physique, they were also trying to scout the best elites.

Elite players could obtain extremely powerful skills. Not only Nie Yan, but other players also had the same opportunities. In the previous timeline, there were hundreds of players with the Junior Devil Slayer title. However, they all obtained this title when they were well over Level 100. Perhaps Nie Yan was the first player to receive it at such a low level.

Nie Yan would have to carefully consider if he wanted to use Divine Recruitment. The hourly fee was a bit expensive. It probably wouldn't be worthwhile to summon a Paladin unless he was backed into a corner.

Intimidate and Deterrence also received an upgrade. Overall, the rewards of the Junior Devil Slayer title were pretty good.

Nie Yan thought for a moment. With the Junior Devil Slayer title, it was rumoured he could access a secret shop in Calore and purchase items that were unavailable to ordinary players. The vast majority of goods sold there were for hunting evil creatures. Many of them were quite useful.

Nie Yan planned to check out the secret shop after returning to Calore. He wondered what sort of benefits he could reap from the place.

Nie Yan brought his three Zombie Foremen and Lil' Gold to a thicket in the Falling Gully. He saw a flash of magic light up the

darkness far in the distance like twinkling stars.

Nie Yan entered stealth and went over there to investigate.

Under his control, the three Zombie Foremen and Lil' Gold followed closely behind him.

Nie Yan was hidden in the darkness. After running for about a minute, he finally got close enough to see over 60 players fighting a giant five meter tall zombie. It had a disgusting appearance, looking like a rotund mass of rotting flesh. It was unceasingly slashing away with the giant machete in its hand.

Nie Yan activated Transcendent Insight.

Zombie Overseer (Lord): Level 50

Health: 173,852/320,000

What a huge amount of health!

It was a Level 50 Lord. No wonder there were so many players!

Nie Yan gazed at this group of 60 players. The frontliners surrounded the Zombie Overseer while the casters in the back fired magic at it nonstop. They were quite organized, with their levels ranging from Level 40-47. He didn't know if the players from the Evil Faction were roughly around the same level as the players from the Righteous Faction. However, he felt these before him were probably regarded as elites. He quickly spotted their leader, a Necromancer who was issuing a steady stream of commands.

The Necromancer wore a black robe with three golden medals on his chest, which dazzled brilliantly under the flashes of magic. He looked to be around 25 years old. He had fair skin and blonde hair, making him resemble an aristocrat. He was probably of foreign descent. Under his command, their teamwork was near flawless. It appeared this fellow was a natural leader.

Nie Yan inspected the Necromancer.

Dark (Necromancer): Level 47

Necromancers were notorious for being a difficult class to level early on. Only after reaching Level 60 and learning the Soul Splitting skill, which allowed them to control more undead, would their levelling speed increase. For Dark to have reached Level 47 at this stage of the game was quite the feat.

Nie Yan was hesitating on what he should do next. Kill these players? For him, this was actually possible!

Since they were in the middle of dealing with a Level 50 Lord, he could probably wipe them all out if he took action. When players from the Righteous Faction and Evil Faction encountered each other, it was usually a case of if I don't kill you, you'll kill me!

Chapter 342 – Launching a Sneak Attack

Nie Yan commanded Lil' Gold and the three Zombie Foremen to approach from a relatively safe path with plenty of cover to avoid detection.

None of the players noticed Nie Yan's presence since they were too preoccupied with the Zombie Overseer. It sent a large portion of the frontline flying with every sweep of its giant machete. However, there were already Spectral Knights on standby to plug in the breach with impeccable coordination. It appeared they were quite experienced fighting this boss.

Many guilds hunted a Lord multiple times to farm for rare drops or parts of a set. They would station players to level nearby and wait for it to respawn, which usually took a day or two, after which a team would be dispatched to kill it.

Asskickers United also followed this method to farm Lords. With Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, Yi Yan, and the other powerful Fighters each leading a team, their efficiency was phenomenal.

Nie Yan wondered which guild this group of players belonged to. When he saw the dark eagle crest on their chests, his mind trembled. It was the emblem of Fallen Angel, the top guild in Necropolis City, which was the capital of the Undead Empire! He had learned about them during his research. Their guild leader was a Dark Incantist called Plenty, a master of curses and black magic and a hegemon of the Underworld!

Controlling Necropolis City was tantamount to ruling the entire Undead Empire. This absolutely wasn't an exaggeration. Despite having over 31 cities in total, over 35% of the Undead Empire's population was concentrated in Necropolis City. Guilds that rivalled Fallen Angel could be counted on one hand.

Due to the limited interaction between the Righteous Faction and Evil Faction, players rarely paid attention to what happened

outside of their respective sides, with only a few guild leaders receiving the occasional update. Nie Yan's knowledge of Fallen Angel was limited. And since the sources of his information were difficult to confirm, it was hard to judge their authenticity.

Nie Yan would be attracting the ire of Fallen Angel by ambushing this group. After thinking for a moment, he decided to go through with it. Their paths weren't likely to cross again. He would probably end up somewhere else the next time he opened the Dark Portal. His goal for coming to the Underworld was simply to stock up on equipment which increased Night Vision. He would be leaving after five days anyways. Although Fallen Angel was powerful, it would be incredibly difficult for them to kill him, especially in this dark environment which bolstered his stealthing abilities even further.

As for the quests related to the Underworld, Nie Yan didn't plan on attempting them yet. Their difficulty was simply too high for the current him.

Nie Yan no longer hesitated. The Zombie Foremen and Lil' Gold were in position. He waited for the perfect opportunity to strike.

At this moment, the Zombie Overseer's health fell to 5%. Its skin started changing into a peculiar black colour.

"The Zombie Overseer is enraged! Be careful! Casters, spread out!" Dark shouted. As soon as he gave the command, the nearby casters fanned out and took up suitable vantage points to cast spells from.

"Casters, maintain your damage!"

"Blood Scar, lock down its foot!"

After the Zombie Overseer became enraged, the frontline almost instantly collapsed. With a single kick, it sent several Spectral Knights flying. As it started moving towards the casters, a Spectral Knight clad in black armour charged forward and intercepted its

foot.

After encountering an obstacle, the Zombie Overseer chopped down with its machete on the Spectral Knight called Blood Scar.

Blood Scar quickly raised his shield to block.

A shower of spells bombarded the Zombie Overseer's body.

The casters were tensely firing their magic.

These players were dealing with the Zombie Overseer quite methodically. Without any outside interference, they could easily kill it.

Dark had a look of anticipation on his face. Blood Scar executed his orders flawlessly. Victory was right around the corner!

However, something completely unexpected occurred. Three Zombie Foremen suddenly came barrelling towards them when they were in the middle of fighting the enraged Zombie Overseer. They swung down their hammers and took down a Dark Shaman each.

“Shit! Zombie Foremen!”

“Warriors! Get the Warriors to stop them!”

The group descended into panic.

Dark was taken aback. Prior to engaging the Zombie Overseer, he had personally seen to it that all the Zombie Foremen in the vicinity were cleared, so what hole did these three crawl out from? Not to mention their emergence was simply too abrupt! There was no time to react at all when they charged out of the darkness! Even stranger was them coordinating perfectly to take out three Dark Shamans at once. He felt his blood run cold. The chances of his team wiping increased significantly for every Dark Shaman that died.

Everything happened too quickly!

“Warriors, intercept them!” Dark quickly ordered his summoned

undead to charge toward the Zombie Foremen.

The Zombie Foremen pounced toward the six remaining Dark Shamans, who scattered in every direction.

A silhouette emerged behind one of the fleeing Dark Shamans. He felt a searing heat as a blade shrouded in black flames appeared around his neck.

Cut Throat! A cold light flashed as Zennarde's Sword streaked across the Dark Shaman's throat.

The Dark Shaman wore an expression of disbelief before collapsing dead to the ground. His staff was half-raised in preparation to activate Life Barrier. A pity he was a beat too late.

Nie Yan's critical hit instantly killed the Dark Shaman.

Dark happened to witness this scene. He was briefly dazed before shouting out, "It's that human Thief! Catch him!" He waved his staff and cast Shadow Bind.

The shadows around him shot out toward Nie Yan.

Nie Yan activated Gale Step to avoid the Shadow Bind, then melted back into the darkness, disappearing in front of Dark's eyes.

Dark was surprised his spell missed. For this fellow to have survived in the Underworld for this long, even after stirring up so much trouble, he definitely wasn't normal.

"Be careful of his sneak attacks!" Just as he gave out the warning, he suddenly felt the magical energy in the atmosphere violently fluctuate. He scanned his surroundings and spotted Lil' Gold hidden in the darkness. Less than half his body was visible. It was next to impossible to spot him in such a chaotic situation. However, it was already too late. Lil' Gold finished chanting Meteor Drop.

A giant blazing meteor lit up the sky, crashing down towards the

players.

“It’s an area-of-effect spell. Everybody, run!”

Piercing screams rang out from the crowd. The panicking players scattered outward, but even the fastest of them couldn’t outrun a falling meteor.

「Bang!」Flames splashed in every direction.

Everything in a 20 meter radius was engulfed in a raging inferno.

Pitiful wails sounded out within the blazing region but were soon cut short. Everyone within the blast radius was dead.

Glory Kill! You have obtained 3 Glory for killing an enemy civilian.

Glory Kill! You have obtained 5 Glory for killing an enemy civilian.

...

Nie Yan glanced through the notification log. Over 20 players had died.

However, since the Meteor Drop hadn’t touched the Zombie Overseer, its aggro was still firmly locked on the remaining Fallen Angel players.

“Retreat! Everybody, retreat!” Dark screamed after seeing the situation getting out of his control.

The surviving players scattered like rats.

Seeing his comrades hastily retreating, Blood Scar also gave up on fighting the Zombie Overseer and quickly pulled back. However, how could the Zombie Overseer allow him to leave just like that? It delivered a powerful kick to his shield with unmatched momentum and sent him flying away.

Blood Scar flew out for over 10 meters before crashing into the ground. He staggered back to his feet, with only a sliver of health

separating him between life and death. Unfortunately, the Dark Shamans were running for their lives. They had no time for him.

A silhouette suddenly emerged behind Blood Scar.

Blood Scar was alarmed. He tried to swing around and guard with his shield. But his opponent's movements were too quick. Before he could even comprehend what happened, his vision blanked as he felt a sharp pain in his back.

At Level 47 with the full Dark Aegis Set, Blood Scar was among the top three Spectral Knights in Fallen Angel. This was quite impressive considering the number of talents in Fallen Angel was no less than in Asskickers United. His reaction speed was top-notch. It was a pity he encountered Nie Yan.

After being kicked by the Zombie Overseer, Blood Scar had been inflicted with a dizzy status effect. His Reflex and Speed were at rock bottom. Every small move was difficult. Even if he was a godly player, it would still be impossible for him to guard himself in this situation.

Nie Yan had an accurate grasp of the overall situation. He naturally wouldn't pass on such an easy target, especially when it was the enemy's main tank.

Nie Yan appeared behind Blood Scar and delivered a precise blow to the back of the head with Smothering Strike, then followed up with Backstab and Lacerate, shaving away the remainder of his health.

Blood Scar collapsed to the ground and dropped a black greatshield when he died.

With an expression of pleasant surprise on his face, Nie Yan picked up the shield and put it away in his bag.

Chapter 343 – Black Kingsnake Shield

Nie Yan was curious about the properties of a greatshield dropped from a top ranked Spectral Knight from Fallen Angel. It would be great if it had no faction restriction. The shield of a main tank was usually the most precious piece of equipment on them. For example, Bladelight's current shield would go for over 4,000 gold in the marketplace.

Just as Nie Yan put away the shield in his bag, a shower of spells came raining down on him. He quickly activated his Darkbright Barrier as a membrane of light enveloped him.

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」The bright flashes of magic blinded Nie Yan as his health rapidly plummeted.

Nie Yan hurriedly drank an Intermediate Health Potion. There was no time to examine the properties of the greatshield. He activated Disappear and vanished like a puff of smoke in front of these players from Fallen Angel.

At this moment, the Zombie Overseer swung down with its machete and sent one of Nie Yan's Zombie Foremen flying. It didn't differentiate between friend or foe, attacking anything within sight.

Nie Yan hurriedly commanded his minions to withdraw. He had lost a Zombie Foreman to the Zombie Overseer. But the players from Fallen Angel suffered far heavier losses, with more than 10 of them dying to the Zombie Overseer, while several fleeing survivors were picked off by him.

Nie Yan inspected the Zombie Overseer's health. It had recovered from 5% to 15%. It sauntered over to the Zombie Foreman's corpse and took a huge bite, whereupon its health started recovering even faster.

This was the Corpse Eater skill of the Zombie Overseer!

Nie Yan could've finished the Zombie Overseer off by himself if it had remained at low health. But now, it was impossible. He was forced to give up and retreat with Lil' Gold and his two remaining Zombie Foremen.

While the Zombie Overseer pursued the fleeing players from Fallen Angel, Nie Yan took advantage of the opportunity to pick up all the loot of the ground. He had burned through a lot of his consumables the day prior, so he had plenty of free space in his bag. He obtained quite a few pieces of Level 45 Gold and Dark Gold-grade equipment. Sadly, only a chestplate and a mage hood could be brought back to the surface. The rest of the equipment was restricted to players of the Evil Faction. However, both these items were Dark Gold-grade with decent properties. He planned to store them in the guild's treasury.

Nie Yan's heart skipped a beat when he examined the shield dropped by Blood Scar.

Black Kingsnake Shield (Sub Legendary)

Description: The undead Blacksmith Ini used the scales of a Black Kingsnake to create this greatshield with superb defensive capabilities.

Requirements: 620 Strength, 520 Dexterity

Properties: Defenses 1039–1051, Defend Rate 32%, Resilience +37.

Full Guard: Nullify the damage and effects of any attack targeted at the player. Cooldown: 1 day

Weight: 52 lb

Restrictions: Spectral Knight; can only be equipped by players of the Evil Faction.

What high defense! It was a piece of Sub Legendary-grade equipment. Sadly, it wasn't worth much on the surface due to the faction restriction. Even though it could be broken down into about 600 gold's worth of crafting materials, this was a piddling

amount compared to its true value of 6,000 gold!

Nie Yan thought for a moment. He wasn't allowed to sell items from the Righteous Faction to the Evil Faction. But he was free to do as he pleased with items from the Evil Faction. He could earn quite a bit of gold by selling the Black Kingsnake Shield in an auction house. However, this required him to infiltrate a city in the Underworld first.

This method was also applicable to the other items Nie Yan couldn't bring back to the surface!

It was a pity Nie Yan didn't have enough bagspace. He had to leave behind a few things to make room for more valuable equipment.

Nie Yan headed in the direction Dark and his group fled.

Dark rounded up the scattered survivors after escaping the Zombie Overseer. There were still around 30 of them left, but all the Dark Shamans had died. He was still recovering from his shock that a single human Thief had wiped out more than half of them in the blink of an eye.

"Dark, Blood Scar lost his Black Kingsnake Shield," a subordinate informed dejectedly after receiving word from Blood Scar who had revived in the graveyard.

"Shit! That bastard! We're screwed!" Dark couldn't help but curse. The Black Kingsnake Shield was the most precious piece of equipment in their group. It was a Sub Legendary item worth at least 6,000 gold! How were they going to explain themselves to the guild leader?

Nie Yan's timing was just too perfect. He had ambushed them at the most crucial moment during the battle with the Zombie Overseer. Otherwise, given the level of their skill, even if they couldn't kill him, they wouldn't have suffered such heavy losses.

"Aren't the players from the Righteous Faction supposed to

suffer a 30% stat penalty in the Underworld? Why the hell is he so powerful?” a player asked in bewilderment. “I saw him one-shotting people with full health!” No matter how squishy Dark Shamans were, they should at least be able to take a few hits! However, that Thief killed them instantly! What kind of attack power was this!?

“Did you not see the weapon in his hand? Someone offered 20,000 gold for it as long as it isn’t restricted to only the Righteous Faction!” a nearby Necromancer replied. Many players were curious about the properties of Zennarde’s Sword.

However, even if Nie Yan was killed, Zennarde’s Sword wouldn’t necessarily drop.

“Dark, what do we do now?” asked a Spectral Knight. “Should we chase down Nirvana Flame after we rest and regroup? We’ll get all our equipment back if we kill him! If we return like this, we’ll definitely be punished by the boss.” He sounded a bit desperate.

“Fuck! If you want to die, don’t drag me down with you! Do you think we can find him in this wilderness? Even if we did, so what? He can escape whenever he wants!” Dark cursed. If Nie Yan wanted to run, they had no way of stopping him. With him appearing and disappearing like a ghost, who knew if they could handle him with just their numbers? Dark understood the temperament of the boss. He could tolerate mistakes, but he absolutely wouldn’t condone stupidity!

Everyone nervously scanned the darkness around them. Even if they went looking for Nie Yan, it was impossible to find him. At best, they might find his Zombie Foremen or Lil’ Gold. But that still wouldn’t be useful in catching him.

Everyone was dispirited. They could only return and endure the anger of the boss.

“I’ve reported sightings of Nirvana Flame in Falling Gully on the forums. I’ve also added that he has over 7,000 gold worth of Evil

Faction equipment on him. Even if we don't do anything, I trust many people will come looking for him. Persimmon, have all the Thieves gather here. There'll soon be a large number of players coming to look for him. Go scout around. It'll be best if you find his Zombie Foremen and Golden Dragon. Let's see if we can retrieve that Black Kingsnake Shield. But remember, don't engage him. You guys aren't his match," Dark instructed.

The Thief called Persimmon nodded. "Alright, I'll follow your plan."

Six Thieves entered stealth and melted into the darkness.

"Everyone else, we're returning to Necropolis City," Dark said. The players around him began channelling Return Scrolls.

Following a series of flashes, one player after another teleported away.

When Nie Yan caught up, Dark and his group had already departed. He couldn't help but feel these players were smart. He was more than satisfied with his harvest this time. There was no need to kill them down to the very last man. He checked his own rank. He wasn't far from becoming a commander.

It was quite hard hard to ascend in military ranking. No wonder so few players in the previous timeline could reach the rank of General in the previous timeline, despite spending so much time on the battlefield. Not to mention you could also drop in rank. If a General died several times, they would be demoted to a 10,000-man Commander. 1,000-man Commanders were a common sight.

The players who reached the rank of General generally spent at least two or three years roaming around battlefields. Nie Yan had no delusions about raising his military rank quickly.

Nie Yan entered stealth. He hunted monsters in his path with his Zombie Foremen and Lil' Gold while searching for a nearby village. During his journey, he took control of three more Zombie

Foremen. Like this, the number of minions following him increased.

With Lil' Gold and the Zombie Foremen clearing the path, Nie Yan killed countless Zombie Miners and reached Level 39, with Level 40 not being too far away. He had purified a total of 3,201 evil creatures. He wondered how far he was from unlocking the first seal of Zennarde's Sword. He could only take things one step at a time.

Nie Yan noticed that player activity in the area suddenly spiked. He regularly bumped into large groups of high level players with decent gear. He figured they were here for him. He increased his vigilance.

In the event of trouble, Nie Yan would unsummon Lil' Gold and escape with an Unknown Transfer Scroll.

Just at this moment, Lil' Gold encountered a group of 100 players, all of whom were at least Level 40. They were slowly starting to surround Lil' Gold and the Zombie Foremen.

Trouble had come knocking at the door. Nie Yan stopped scouting ahead and started making his way back to Lil' Gold and the Zombie Foremen.

Nie Yan saw silhouettes moving in the wilderness. They were players from the Evil Faction. He slowly approached them until he was only 10 meters away, observing them silently from the darkness.

Chapter 344 – Three Hammers, Instant Death

“Let’s deal with his pets first, then have the Thieves search around. Nirvana Flame must be in the area!” instructed a Dark Shaman garbed in gray robes. He was called Obsessed, a veteran gamer who had squandered a fortune into popular virtual reality games over the years. He could only spend so lavishly thanks to his family’s wealth. However, he did leave his mark on every game he played, so many people remembered him.

Nie Yan observed Obsessed from in the shadows. He looked to be around 30 years old with a square jaw and thick eyebrows. He handed out orders to the players under him like a seasoned leader.

“Everyone, let’s do our best. We’ll all receive 50 gold each for killing that human Thief and looting his corpse!” Obsessed declared. The crowd immediately erupted into loud cheers.

50 gold was a wealth of riches to these players. Very few of them weren’t tempted.

They started rapidly carrying out Obsessed’s orders. Nie Yan instantly understood from observing their actions that they were merely a ragtag bunch who had temporarily teamed up together for a shared goal. Although they mostly comprised professional players, their skill were middling. True experts disdained from gathering in groups like this.

Nie Yan spotted at least a dozen different guild emblems, while even more weren’t affiliated to any guild.

Nie Yan figured information about him being in Falling Gully had already been disseminated to the outside. This was why this group of players had come here looking for him.

It appeared heading to the nearest village wouldn’t be as easy as he originally thought. If he had to constantly deal with players

chasing after him, he would end up harassed to death.

The best way to keep these pests away was to give them a show of pure strength!

Think you can kill me with numbers alone? Wishful thinking! Nie Yan observed the Spectral Knights nervously moving to surround his five Zombie Foremen with their shields raised.

“Kill!” Obsessed shouted.

The Spectral Knights immediately charged toward the Zombie Foremen.

Nie Yan snickered. You think my Zombie Foremen will just behave like regular mobs? Too naive!

At this moment, two of the Zombie Foremen stepped out to act as obstruction while the other three singled out one of the Spectral Knights and simultaneously swung down with their hammers.

-785

-833

-812

It was direct and efficient with flawless teamwork. The Spectral Knight had a look of disbelief on his face as he collapsed dead on the ground.

The Dark Shamans in the back were speechless. These Zombie Foremen were simply too coordinated! They didn't get a chance to heal that Spectral Knight before he died.

The group of players couldn't help but wonder if this was just a coincidence.

As if to give them an answer, the three Zombie Foremen singled out another Spectral Knight and swung down their hammers.

-828

-793

It was another instant kill!

These Zombie Foremen were already Elites. But their stats were bolstered even further after coming under the influence of Undead Rite. Each of their attacks could shave away over a third of the health of these Spectral Knights. The three of them coordinating their attacks perfectly together made for a shocking sight.

The Zombie Foremen straightened their backs and started moving towards another Spectral Knight with their bloody hammers raised.

Seeing the actions of the Zombie Foremen, the crowd quickly realized this wasn't a coincidence!

“Shit! T-t-these Zombie Foremen, t-t-they...!”

Even the tankiest Spectral Knight among them was still instantly killed by the three-pronged attack of the Zombie Foremen.

The Dark Shamans were at a complete loss. What use was all the healing in the world if it couldn't bring a player back from the dead?

Everyone was stupefied.

The Spectral Knights started ignoring orders and retreating in fear.

“I want two Spectral Knights on each Zombie Foreman. Don't retreat! Stop panicking!” Obsessed cried out in rage. He ordered the casters to start firing their spells.

Unfortunately, this group was nowhere near as organized as one led by a guild. These players had only gathered for their own selfish interests. They wouldn't just throw their lives away for nothing.

“I'll compensate everyone who dies with 50 gold!” Obsessed announced after noticing everyone was still running away. “Now

all of you get the fuck back in there! Hurry up and lock down those Zombie Foremen!”

These players thought for a moment. Even if they died to the Zombie Foremen, all they would be losing was a bit of experience. It could be easily grinded back. As for their equipment, it wasn't worth much in the first place. What was losing one piece compared to gaining 50 gold?

The Spectral Knights stopped retreating. They followed Obsessed's orders and formed a solid wall.

The three Zombie Foremen limped toward the wall and slammed down with their hammers, instantly killing one of the Spectral Knights.

The three Zombie Foremen breached the wall of Spectral Knights, giving the two other Zombie Foremen and Lil' Gold access to the casters in the back.

The five Zombie Foremen and Lil' Gold were an unstoppable force, carrying out a one-sided slaughter as blood-curdling screams filled the air.

Nie Yan meticulously commanded the Zombie Foremen and Lil' Gold from in the shadows. He couldn't afford to pay attention to anything else.

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」A dense hail of spells bombarded one of the Zombie Foremen and shaved away its last bit of health. It let out a mournful moan and collapsed to the ground.

The first Zombie Foreman had died.

Lil' Gold blasted over 10 casters in the distance with Dragon Breath and roasted them to death.

They had lost over a third of their forces within minutes. Obsessed never expected events to develop in this way. The strength of these pets far exceeded his expectations.

The perfect coordination of the three Zombie Foremen was especially frightening.

A shower of spells rained down on the Zombie Foremen. Nie Yan ordered the remaining four Zombie Foremen to hold off the Spectral Knights while Lil' Gold massacred the backline, with corpses littering the ground.

Another Zombie Foreman died. The three remaining Zombie Foremen didn't have much health left either. However, Nie Yan didn't appear particularly heartbroken. They were only temporary minions and would disappear after some time anyway.

Lil' Gold wildly charged forward. As spells and weapons battered his scales, Explosive Counter activated and took out six nearby players.

These pets were too powerful. Obsessed estimated they would soon completely wipe if things continued down this path. He started ordering the players to retreat into an area filled with piles of rocks and boulders.

Since the complex terrain would greatly hinder the movements of the Zombie Foremen and Lil' Gold, Nie Yan ordered them to return back to his side.

Even after seeing Lil' Gold and the Zombie Foremen retreat, these players still had some lingering fear in their hearts. Obsessed looked at the players around him and let out a deep sigh. At the end of the day, a ragtag group was too unreliable.

These players could be considered decently skilled among the player base. They were familiar with ordinary battles. However, when they encountered Nie Yan's unconventional tactics, they immediately descended into panic.

Obsessed recalled the battle just now. The combined attacks of three Zombie Foremen could instantly kill even the tankiest Spectral Knight among them, to say nothing of squishy casters like

him!

To be able to control Zombie Foremen in such a way, this player from the surface definitely wasn't simple. If there was an opportunity, Obsessed hoped to befriend Nirvana Flame.

The Thieves from Fallen Angel had witnessed the entire course of the battle from the shadows. They were waiting for Nie Yan to appear, but he unexpectedly never showed up. Everything ended not long after it started. They gazed at each other with lingering shock and fear in their eyes. The combined attacks of the three Zombie Foremen was too frightening!

When they recalled how Nie Yan had previously wiped out half of their team, it didn't seem that strange anymore.

Nie Yan walked out of the darkness. He had Lil' Gold and the surviving Zombie Foremen rest and recover their health.

He checked his own status. He had risen to the rank of a 10-man commander. It gave him 3% defense bonus and 5% health bonus, which wasn't too bad.

Just at this moment, Nie Yan sensed someone gazing at him from within the darkness.

Thief?

Nie Yan activated Eye of Truth. The veins around his eyes bulged out while his pupils blossomed out with a profound light. He started scanning his surroundings.

Persimmon and the other Thieves hidden in the darkness were badly frightened by the change in Nie Yan's eyes. His gaze appeared to pierce through the darkness, carrying a terrifying killing intent. They didn't dare to move an inch from their current positions.

Persimmon and the other Thieves held their breaths at the sight of these demonic eyes.

This was an eye skill!

Most eye skills could see through things like stealth. They were toast if Nie Yan caught them!

As time passed, Persimmon and the other Thieves felt like their backs were soaked in cold sweat.

Nie Yan withdrew his gaze after failing to discover anything. He led Lil' Gold and the Zombie Foremen away.

Seeing Nie Yan's retreating figure, Persimmon and the other Thieves breathed out a sigh of relief. Their hearts had been stretched taut. It felt like they had a brief encounter with death.

"Holy shit! I nearly pissed my pants. What was that eye skill just now?"

"It kind of looks like Demon Eyes."

"It's not Demon Eyes."

"Did any of you record a video of the Zombie Foremen massacring those Spectral Knights?"

"I did."

Persimmon collected the video. Everything that just happened would forever remain in their minds.

Chapter 345 – Slaughter God

Breaking Cliff Crypt Stronghold, the territory of Fallen Angel, was constructed out of giant stone structures with numerous towering spires.

A Dark Incantist sat solemnly in a spacious hall within the Fallen Angel guild headquarters. He held a bonewood staff with a dark blue orb embedded at the tip in his hand. His coal-gray robes embroidered with gold embellishments overflowed with magical energy. Stitched to his collar was a crimson shadow vine coiled around a white skull.

He was a 27-year-old man with a tall stature and somewhat of a heroic appearance. His gaze flickered with a frosty and imposing light.

He was Plenty, the guild leader of Fallen Angel.

Dark, Blood Scar, and several others were trembling in front of Plenty, not daring to utter a single word. They could sense his fury from losing the Black Kingsnake Shield.

Dark wanted to speak up but hesitated. He didn't dare to challenge the authority of the guild leader.

“Dark, explain yourself,” Plenty said in a heavy tone.

Dark gulped before taking a deep breath. “Everything was originally going according to plan, the Zombie Overseer was almost dead. But then, we were suddenly caught off guard by several Zombie Foremen and that Golden Dragon. That human Thief, he was too fast. He wiped out all our Dark Shamans before we could even react. Blood Scar was incapacitated by the Zombie Overseer's kick. He had no way of defending himself...”

Plenty cut off Dark. “I'm not looking into who was at fault. However, I want the Black Kingsnake Shield back at all costs. Did Persimmon report back with anything?”

Dark breathed out a sigh of relief after knowing Plenty wasn't going to punish anyone. He hurriedly replied, "We last heard from Persimmon when he reported spotting that human Thief's pets. I'll ask him for an update right now."

Before long, Persimmon sent back a video.

"Boss, Persimmon sent over a video. I'll play it for everyone to watch."

The video started off with five Zombie Foremen and a Golden Dragon crushing a group of 100 players. The Zombie Foremen were especially eye-catching as they swept everything before them with their perfectly synchronized three-pronged attacks. Even though Nie Yan never appeared during the actual battle, one could imagine the mental drain of controlling six minions at the same time. Nie Yan finally revealed himself walking out of the darkness near the end. He seemed to sense something off and swung his head around, staring directly at the viewer. The veins around his eyes were visible, and his pupils shone with a soul-piercing light.

Dark, Blood Scar, and the others gasped.

Plenty tapped on the armrest of his throne. "This fellow is a bit interesting. Have Persimmon continue tailing him!" He debated whether or not he should dispatch a few hundred to a thousand players to surround Nie Yan. Catching a Thief, especially a highly skilled one, was no easy feat in the eternal night of the Underworld.

Dark inwardly rejoiced after seeing Plenty's mood lighten up. Persimmon's video had undoubtedly saved their hides. It wasn't due to their incompetence that they almost wiped, but rather the enemy was simply too powerful!

"Boss, what do we do now?" Dark asked.

"Keep a watch over him. The Black Kingsnake Shield isn't worth much on the surface, maybe a few hundred gold in raw materials.

Its value in the Underworld is more than tenfold higher. He surely know this as well. I doubt he'll be so foolish as to bring it back to the surface. Find someone to get in touch with him," Plenty ordered. He was determined to retrieve the Black Kingsnake Shield at all costs. It was best if he could achieve this without force. But if things went down that path, so be it.

No matter how strong Nie Yan was, Necropolis City was his domain. Even a dragon would fail to repress a local snake.

Dark immediately passed down Plenty's orders to Persimmon.

Persimmon's group was no match for Nie Yan, but they were still elite Thieves. Tailing someone without being noticed, especially in this dark environment, was a relatively simple matter. They probably couldn't shadow Nie Yan directly, but tracking his Zombie Foremen and Golden Dragon was no problem.

Bits and pieces of the battle between Nie Yan and the 100 players surfaced on Necropolis City's forums. Seeing everything had basically been revealed, Persimmon posted up the full video, which immediately rose up to the top.

The three pronged attacks of the Zombie Foremen and Nie Yan's Eye of Truth left a deep impression on the players of Necropolis City. Even after slaughtering around 300 players in total, he was still running amok.

His icy gaze brimming with killing intent and glowing eyes that pierced through the darkness were deeply imprinted into their minds.

The players of Necropolis City began referring to Nie Yan as the Slaughter God. Only this nickname properly conveyed the reverence they felt for him. It was an apt description of a fierce character like him who had single-handedly repelled hundreds of Level 40 and over players.

Nie Yan's bounty subsequently rose to 1,000 gold. Add this to the

more than 7,000 gold's worth of Evil Faction equipment known to be on him, and the players of Necropolis City viewed him as a walking treasure vault. Many guilds were starting to grow restless. But they all restrained themselves because Fallen Angel had yet to take action!

Fallen Angel was the top guild in Necropolis City. All the other guilds naturally followed their lead.

Nie Yan continued travelling through Falling Gully. Following the defeat and subsequent retreat of Obsessed's group, he saw a dramatic decline in the number of players looking for him. Even though he encountered a few fools every now and then, he easily dispatched them with Lil' Gold and the Zombie Foremen.

Nie Yan was like a phantom, sporadically revealing himself near Lil' Gold and the Zombie Foremen. Very few players were able to catch a glimpse of his silhouette.

Nie Yan finally left Falling Gully. He saw a towering lighthouse in the distance. It was over several dozen meters tall. Its flame gently flickered in the wind as if it could go out at any moment.

This was a sign of civilization!

It was quite easy for people to lose their way in the Underworld, so many villages, towns, and cities created lighthouses to serve as landmarks.

Nie Yan had finally found a settlement in the Underworld!

It was risky for Nie Yan to infiltrate an Evil Faction settlement. The place might end up as his burial ground if he made the slightest mistake.

Nie Yan was forging a completely new path. Success would equate to another huge source of capital!

Some risks were worth taking.

Nie Yan no longer hesitated and started heading in the direction

of the lighthouse.

As Nie Yan drew closer to his destination, he unsummoned Lil' Gold and ordered the Zombie Foremen to go off grinding mobs on their own. Afterwards, he entered stealth and dashed toward the settlement.

Persimmon and the other Thieves were taken aback. They had completely lost sight of Nie Yan after he unsummoned Lil' Gold.

They didn't dare to get too close to Nie Yan. They could only rely on their Night Vision to keep track of him from afar. When they saw him disappear, they initially thought he had discovered them. But after a brief moment of tension, they found out he was no longer in the vicinity.

They had lost Nie Yan!

The several Zombie Foremen scattered in different directions and started hunting mobs on their own, as if they had been abandoned by Nie Yan.

「Boss! Nirvana Flame unsummoned his Golden Dragon and disappeared,」Persimmon reported to Plenty. When he learned the guild leader had decided to personally handle this matter, he was terrified. Now that he had lost the person they were supposed to be tracking, he began panicking and was at a loss at what to do.

「Where did you lose him?」Plenty asked with a frown. He doubted Nie Yan would disappear for no reason. From his observations, the Zombie Foremen were minions that could be discarded at any time. Only the Golden Dragon was his real pet.

「We lost sight of him near Valitin Graveyard Village. I saw him heading there,」Persimmon replied. He couldn't help but wonder if Nie Yan was really going to Valitin Graveyard Village. But that was a settlement of the Evil Faction! It was filled with players, and the NPCs there were at least Level 50 Elites. He recalled there even being two Level 100 guards. Going there was suicidal for a player

from the Righteous Faction!

Logically speaking, players from the Righteous Faction would do their utmost to stay as far away as possible from places like this. What could be gained from throwing their life away?

「I think Nirvana Flame might have unsummoned the Golden Dragon to avoid drawing attention from the NPCs and players from Valitin Graveyard Village,」Persimmon tried to give a plausible explanation.

Plenty was deep in thought, so he didn't pay attention to Persimmon's ramblings. He was trying to guess Nie Yan's objective for coming to the Underworld. He doubted a player would wander around aimlessly in the wilderness for days and brave so many dangers for leisure, especially considering Nie Yan was also a guild leader.

“I should make a trip to Valitin Graveyard Village...” Plenty muttered. He stood up and began walking towards the stronghold's transfer point.

The Fallen Angel players he passed in the hallway would immediately greet him with respect.

“Hello, Boss!”

“Good day, Guild Leader!”

...

Plenty slightly nodded in acknowledgement. He entered the stronghold's transfer point and set his destination to Valitin Graveyard Village before teleporting away with a flash of light.

Chapter 346 – Graveyard Village

You have discovered Valitin Graveyard Village.

Valitin Graveyard Village was surrounded by dilapidated tombstones, the words engraved on them having long since become unrecognizable. The earth was littered with the bones of the dead. The village was enclosed by wooden fencing and contained only around a dozen buildings, the most conspicuous of which being the lighthouse. However, its foundation was slowly sinking into the ground, and even appeared to be on the brink of collapsing.

The graveyard surrounding Valitin was its most effective defense against attackers. With a nearly inexhaustible supply of corpses, NPCs could summon an army of skeleton soldiers whenever a battle broke out. This was why Valitin didn't require walls.

Near the outskirts of the village, Nie Yan put on some black garbs and covered his face with a cloak. He used the Necklace of Deception to alter his alignment to the Evil Faction and drank a Potion of Illusion concocted by Bird to change his appearance.

The Necklace of Deception's effect lasted for 3 hours. Only certain special skills could see through it.

In towns and cities, no one would randomly use an eye skill to inspect another player.

Nie Yan was also a madman. Very few people would dare to do what he was doing right now.

Of course, Nie Yan wasn't a reckless fool. He hid an Unknown Transfer scroll in his pocket, so he could teleport away at a moment's notice if he was recognized by an NPC.

A Necromancer and a Dark Incantist passed by Nie Yan on the road. They glanced at him for a moment before turning away with disinterest.

Little did they know that Nie Yan was prepared for a fight. He couldn't confirm whether or not the Necklace of Deception was effective. Seeing these two players hadn't recognize him, he breathed out a sigh of relief.

Nie Yan walked toward the village entrance, which was littered with all sorts of junk.

Two guards clad in tattered armour and wielding shabby halberds stood at either side of the entrance. Beneath their rusty helmets were skeletal faces. They inspected every player that entered the village.

Skeleton Guardian (Elite): Level ???

Health: ???

Nie Yan couldn't see the levels of these Skeleton Guardians. He feared they would see through his disguise. He gritted his teeth and walked forward, bracing himself for the worst.

The Skeleton Guardians looked in Nie Yan's direction. The green flames in their eye sockets flickered as they stared at his face for a long time.

Nie Yan's nerves were stretched taut. These Skeleton Guardians were capable of dispatching him in a single hit. He clutched the Unknown Transfer Scroll in his hand. He planned to teleport away at the slightest sign of danger. If he was slow by a beat, he was dead meat.

The Skeleton Guardians stiffly turned away their heads. An odd groaning sound escaped from their jaws. They no longer paid attention to Nie Yan and started inspecting the next player in line.

Only then did Nie Yan's grip on the Unknown Transfer Scroll relax. He passed the Skeleton Guardians and walked into the village.

Valitin was a run-down village. Several of its buildings were teetering on the verge of collapse. No one knew how long it had

existed. However, its bluestone streets were bustling with activity. There were many Level 40–50 maps nearby, so many players came here in droves every day, which of course brought in a lot of trade. There were many player owned stalls set up along the sides of the street, selling all sorts of equipment and materials. The sound of players haggling over prices could be heard everywhere.

The liveliness here was not the slightest bit inferior to that of the towns and villages surrounding Calore.

Nie Yan gazed at the village center, where there stood an ancient stone transfer point which could teleport him to the nearest city.

Nie Yan was in no rush to head over to Necropolis City. The danger there was much greater than in Valitin. After all, it was the capital of the Undead Empire. The NPCs there were much stronger than the ones in Valitin. The chances of him getting recognized would also skyrocket. It was probably best to save visiting Necropolis City for his fifth and final day in the Underworld.

Nie Yan found a corner and set up a stall, taking out all the equipment he had obtained over the past two days.

There were 26 pieces of equipment in total. Each one was worth at least 100 gold. On the surface, they would only be worth a few gold.

He didn't take out the Black Kingsnake Shield. It was too eye-catching and easily recognizable.

Nie Yan leisurely sat behind his stall, watching players walk up and down the street. He began chatting with a neighbouring vendor, a Level 40 Necromancer with the appearance of a 26-year-old man. His equipment was shabby, and he seemed like a person who wore his heart on his sleeve.

“Friend, let me asking you something,” Nie Yan said.

“What is it? Just speak, I'm all ears,” the Necromancer replied in a friendly manner. His eyes widened in shock when he saw the

goods Nie Yan had up for sale. Any of those 26 pieces of equipment was something he couldn't afford, even if he sold everything he owned. He was naturally flattered when Nie Yan took the initiative to greet him.

Since Nie Yan hid his level and name and his face was covered in black garbs, the Necromancer could only wonder about his identity.

“What's your name? Nie Yan asked. He felt the Necromancer was pleasing to the eye.

“I'm Life's a Drama,” the Necromancer replied.

“Ah, I like your name! Life's a Drama, can you tell me what the market price for Night Vision equipment is these days?”

“Sure sure. Equipment with Night Vision +1 usually goes for around 5 silver. Equipment with Night Vision +2...” Life's a Drama answered without thinking. He began listing out the prices in order from lowest to highest.

“Stop stop stop! Just tell me the prices from +7 and up,” Nie Yan interrupted. It wasn't worthwhile for him to bring back Night Vision +1 and +2 equipment to the surface.

Life's a Drama gazed at Nie Yan meaningfully. To only care about equipment with Night Vision +7 and up, the rich were truly different. “I'm not too knowledgeable, but I think equipment with Night Vision +7 sells for 30 gold, +10 for 100 gold, and +15 for 300 gold.”

The prices of such equipment would be over 10–20 times higher on the surface!

Nie Yan had a vision of gold coins pouring from the sky. Night Vision equipment was simply too rare on the surface, while the demand for them was excessively high, to the extent equipment with Night Vision +7 and higher had no set market price. They were a necessity for any player braving dangerous environments

like caves. Thieves might be fine since they could stealth when they encountered danger. However, Mages would probably die without so much as knowing what killed them.

“Hey, the equipment you’re selling looks pretty valuable. I don’t see any piece worth less than 100 gold,” Life’s a Drama couldn’t help but remark. All the equipment in Nie Yan’s stall combined was probably worth several thousand gold.

“Pick one that catches your eye. I’ll gift it to you.” Nie Yan chuckled. Life’s a Drama failed to see the cunning glint in his eyes. He had suddenly thought of a brilliant idea. Why should he brave the dangers of Necropolis City when he could just get someone else to go there for him? It just so happened he had a suitable candidate right in front of him.

Nie Yan could trade with players of the Evil Faction thanks to the Necklace of Deception.

This was a wonderful loophole. When Nie Yan was disguised, players of the Evil Faction who unwittingly traded with him wouldn’t be held accountable. If he was exposed, the authorities of the Evil Faction would investigate every player who had made contact with him to track down any traitors.

“No no no, it’s fine.” Life’s a Drama hurriedly waved his hand.

Nie Yan faintly smiled without saying anything. He was currently figuring out how he could bring his plan to fruition.

Before long, a large crowd gathered around Nie Yan’s stall. The reason was simple. The goods he was selling were of really high quality, something rarely seen.

A tall Spectral Knight squeezed through the crowd and crouched down in front of Nie Yan’s stall. He pointed at a chestplate and asked, “How much?”

The chestplate had decent properties. It increased Defense Level by 1 as well as Strength and Endurance.

“Make an offer,” Nie Yan replied. He just wanted to get rid of all this equipment as quickly as possible, so he planned to just take any reasonable offer.

“How about 300 gold?”

Nie Yan looked at the properties. He reckoned the price was fair, and he wasn't in the mood to haggle. Just as he was about to nod in agreement, Life's a Drama interrupted, “Your offer is too low. The Defense Level +1 alone increases the value by 200 gold. This chestplate is worth at least 500 gold!”

The Spectral Knight wanted to jump up and give Life's a Drama a beating. Why would a wealthy person like Nie Yan care about a measly 200 gold? It was obviously he only set up a stall here because he wanted to get rid of the equipment quickly. He was just about to get a good deal on that chestplate, but that neighbouring stall owner ruined everything!

The Spectral Knight glared at Life's a Drama, but Life's a Drama didn't back down in the slightest.

“He's my friend,” Nie Yan said as he lightly glanced at the Spectral Knight. He couldn't help but feel this Life's a Drama fellow was quite interesting.

The Spectral Knight's anger immediately smothered. Nie Yan's background was a mystery, but he knew offending him was definitely a death wish.

“Expert, we really don't have that much gold, even if my six teammates and I pooled all our funds together. Please, give us a discount,” the Spectral Knight sincerely pleaded.

Chapter 347 – An Invitation to Chat

Life's a Drama felt like he was on cloud nine after hearing Nie Yan refer to him as a friend. He proudly held his head up high and stuck out his chest.

Many of the nearby stall owners had expressions of envy on their faces. Life's a Drama really was a lucky bastard, to have befriended a mysterious expert like Nie Yan. They wondered when they would get to be so lucky.

“Alright, how much do you have?” Nie Yan asked the Spectral Knight.

The Spectral Knight felt a little guilty being stared at by Nie Yan. He finally answered after a long time, “360 gold is all we have. Can you hold onto that chestplate? I’m going to ask my friends for the gold. I’ll be back in a minute, I promise. Please wait for me!”

“Fine, bring the 360 gold over, and I’ll sell you this chestplate,” Nie Yan said after thinking for a moment.

“R-really? You’re not joking?” the Spectral Knight asked with an expression of disbelief. He was wondering if he had misheard.

“Gold only,” Nie Yan said. He had no interest in taking collateral.

“Yes, yes, of course! Thank you brother! I’ll immediately contact my friends to bring the gold over!” The Spectral Knight was giddy with excitement. How could he not be? Nie Yan agreed to sell him a chestplate worth at least 500 gold for just 360 gold!

The onlookers, including Life's a Drama, stared at Nie Yan in awe and surprise. 500 gold and 360 gold, this was a whopping difference of 140 gold!

The Spectral Knight was over the moon with excitement.

“Wait!” An Undead Raider stepped out of the crowd. “Friend, can you sell me that chestplate? I’m willing to offer 500 gold.”

Nie Yan glanced at the Undead Raider. His chestplate was a set item, so he clearly had no need for this one. Then why was he willing to offer 500 gold for it? Maybe for a friend?

The Spectral Knight glared at the Undead Raider. Just when he had finally negotiated a price with Nie Yan, someone stuck their nose in and wanted to snatch the chestplate right out of his hands. How could he not feel unresigned? However, any thoughts of fighting back were immediately snuffed out after he saw the Fallen Angel guild insignia on the Undead Raider's chest. It wasn't like he could stop others from competing with him, especially when the other side was willing to pay much more than him! He had no one to blame but himself. Who told him to be so poor?

Nie Yan didn't bat an eyelid. "The chestplate has already been sold. Pick something else."

"No. I want that chestplate," replied the Undead Raider in a heavy voice as he gazed at Nie Yan dead in the eye.

The onlookers started slowly backing away. The players of Fallen Angel normally didn't behave in such a forceful manner. Did this stall owner somehow offend them? Is that why this Undead Raider was purposefully stirring up trouble?

Nie Yan coldly glanced at the Undead Raider. "Did you not hear what I just said? This chestpiece has already been sold. I never go back on my word."

The Spectral Knight was moved. He never expected Nie Yan to be still willing to sell the chestplate to him, even after someone else offered a higher price.

The onlookers couldn't help but admire Nie Yan for sticking to his guns. It wasn't something everyone could do.

Life's a Drama also had a look of respect in his eyes.

The atmosphere was somewhat tense.

The expression of the Undead Raider suddenly relaxed into a

bright smile. “Brother, don’t take offense. I was just kidding. Give me a price for the remaining items, I want all of them. I hope we can be friends.”

Nie Yan could tell the Undead Raider was being sincere. It appeared he really wasn’t looking for trouble.

Nie Yan turned to Life’s a Drama. “Hey, can you do me a favour? Give me the total for the remaining items according to market price.”

“No problem!” Life’s a Drama began calculating the value of the items, one after another.

Before long, the friend of the Spectral Knight arrived with the gold and completed the trade for the chestplate with Nie Yan.

“I really can’t thank you enough for selling me this chestplate. How about we add each other as friends? If you ever need anything in the future, just let me know!!” the Spectral Knight sincerely said. He really admired Nie Yan’s character.

“No need. Just tell me your name. If that day ever comes, I’ll come looking for you,” Nie Yan said. There was no harm in making a few more contacts in the Underworld.

“I’m called Street Wanderer.” The Spectral Knight introduced himself.

Nie Yan nodded. “I’ll remember your name.”

The Spectral Knight turned to Life’s a Drama. “I’m sorry about earlier. I was really anxious about getting that chestplate. Please don’t take it to heart.”

Life’s a Drama waved his hand and smiled. “No problem. I’ve already forgotten about it.”

Street Wanderer added Life’s a Drama as a friend before happily departing with chestplate in hand.

Life’s a Drama quoted the remaining items at around 3,900 gold.

“Just give me 3,500 gold.” Nie Yan looked at the Undead Raider. Since Life’s a Drama wasn’t an objective third party, it would be difficult for him not to slightly lean in his favour when evaluating the worth of these items. Given their quality, he felt 3,500 gold was a fair price.

“Alright, deal.” The Undead Raider didn’t bother haggling and confirmed the trade with Nie Yan right away.

Nie Yan glanced at his bag. He had finally made his first real profit since arriving in the Underworld.

The Undead Raider smiled and held out his hand for a handshake. “Let’s be friends. I’m Proud Warlance. What should I call you?”

Nie Yan sized up Warlance. Given he wore a full set of Level 45 Dark Gold-grade equipment, he should be pretty strong. He looked to be around 22 years old and gave off the feeling of a lone wolf.

Undead Raiders were similar to Berserkers in that they specialized in PvP. Undead Raider was probably a top notch player, on the same level as Monochrome and Edgeless.

Nie Yan extended out his hand and was just about to invent a name.

「Actually, no need to introduce yourself. I already know who you are,」Warlance whispered.

Nie Yan’s heart shook. His eyes narrowed and flashed with a frightening glint. However, he didn’t take any action. How did his cover get blown, and why hadn’t Warlance outed him to the NPCs despite knowing his identity?

Nie Yan wondered why Warlance got into contact with him.

Nie Yan remained vigilant. He was ready to crush the Unknown Transfer Scroll in his hand and teleport away at a moment’s notice.

「Some of the equipment you're selling used to belong to my fellow guild members, including the chestplate you sold to that Spectral Knight! Since I bought them all from you, I naturally didn't come with malicious intent. My guild leader wants to meet you,」Warlance explained as if he already knew what was on Nie Yan's mind. He was surprised to see Nie Yan had snuck in here by using a skill to alter his alignment and admired such courage. There was no way he himself would dare to infiltrate a settlement in the Righteous Faction.

The guild leader of Fallen Angel? Nie Yan pondered to himself. He was trying to guess the intentions of the other party.

「Even though Fallen Angel and Asskickers United belong to different factions, we don't have any conflicting interests. It would be mutually beneficial for both of us to work together,」Warlance said. Unless the Righteous Faction and Evil Faction became embroiled in an all-out war, Fallen Angel and Asskickers United would probably never directly clash. With this being the case, there was an opportunity for cooperation.

Logically speaking, it was impossible for players from opposing factions to cooperate. However, things were different since Nie Yan could alter his alignment.

「Where is your guild leader?」Nie Yan asked. Since the other side could locate him within a sea of people, they definitely weren't lacking in ability. He was somewhat interested in the prospect of working together.

「Please remember, we don't know you,」Warlance stressed.

Nie Yan nodded. This was necessary in order for Fallen Angel to not be implicated if his dealings in the Underworld were ever exposed one day. Their cooperation would also have to remain a secret.

「Nice to meet you. I'm called Blaze.」Nie Yan shook Warlance's hand. He used a fake name, but it was fine since Warlance was

aware of his real identity.

It was always pleasant to associate with smart people. Warlance gave Nie Yan a knowing smile.

“Follow me, my guild leader is waiting.”

“Hold on a moment.” Nie Yan turned to Life’s a Drama.

Life’s a Drama stood up nervously. He was in shock after hearing Undead Raider introduce himself as Proud Warlance. This was the Vice Guild Leader of Fallen Angel! Yet such a figure had only come as a messenger. He was utterly convinced Nie Yan was also an amazing figure!

“Life’s a Drama.”

“Y-yes! What do you need?”

Nie Yan handed over 100 gold to Life’s a Drama. “Here’s your reward for helping me out today. Thanks to you I was able to make a killing.”

“No, how can I accept this?” Life’s a Drama hurriedly refused. Even all his assets combined still wouldn’t amount to 100 gold. However, he couldn’t just take Nie Yan’s gift for nothing.

“Don’t be such a sissy. Take it. I’ll come looking for you when I need help in the future.” Nie Yan patted Life’s a Drama on the shoulders. He appreciated Life’s a Drama’s sincerity. A person like this was reliable and worth befriending.

Warlance smiled at Life’s a Drama. “Just accept it. 100 gold is nothing to people like us.”

Life’s a Drama no longer refused. He nodded and accepted the 100 gold from Nie Yan. “If you ever need me in the future, just send a whisper. I’ll be there immediately, come hell or high water!”

“No need to go that far,” Nie Yan chuckled. He then turned to Warlance. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Alright, follow me.” Warlance led Nie Yan away.

Life's a Drama stared at Nie Yan's retreating figure before packing up his stall. Since he was no longer short on funds, he planned to level up and upgrade his equipment. It would be disgraceful if he wasn't of any use the next time Nie Yan called for his help

Chapter 348 – Smuggling

Nie Yan and Warlance walked past many streets before arriving at a small tavern. The furnishings were old-fashioned, and the lighting was a dim yellow. An old fat man stood behind the counter muttering something under his breath.

Rows of shabby-looking chairs and beaten-up tables filled the tavern. There weren't many players about, as only those with a specific purpose came here. No one would choose to waste their time sitting around such a dingy place.

A man who looked to be in his late twenties sat quietly at a table in the corner. He wore an ash-grey robe and his hand rested on a bonewood staff. The man raised his glass in greeting as Nie Yan approached.

Nie Yan's gaze immediately sharpened. The familiar figure before him brought back yet another tide of old memories.

This was the head of Fallen Angel!

During the interfaction conflicts of the previous timeline, Plenty had personally led an army of tens of thousands on a slaughter in Calore. They kicked off their campaign by steamrolling Lincoln Village before seizing control over 6 strongholds near Calore. At first, Victorious Return and Radiant Sacred Flame tried to avoid fighting them, but public outrage forced them into waging a massive war between factions. Fallen Angel managed to hold out for over a month before finally succumbing to Calore's war of attrition. They retreated to the Underworld, but their conquest would forever be a stain on the Viridian Empire's history.

Many images of Fallen Angel's guild leader had been taken and shared, leaving an extremely deep impression on the players of Calore.

At the time, Nie Yan had been a complete nobody. Legendary

figures such as Plenty wouldn't take note of him. He never expected to one day sit down at a table with this man.

Nie Yan activated Transcendent Insight.

Plenty: Level 51

Health: 2,112/2,112

Level 51...! Damn!

Nie Yan was finally certain. It was him! There was a joke in the previous timeline: "Plenty of money, Plenty of people." Fallen Angel at its peak was an existence even Radiant Sacred Flame and Victorious Return could only look up to. With over 100 master-class players, six major branches with a total of 600,000 members, and over 300 strongholds to their name, they were a true behemoth. Their influence reached across the entire Underworld. This was why Victorious Return and Radiant Sacred Flame were hesitant to go to war against them, and why they ended up resorting to a war of attrition.

"Hello," Nie Yan greeted, calmly observing Plenty.

"Sit," Plenty replied, unfazed by Nie Yan's gaze.

Nie Yan sat across from him, inwardly marveling about how things had changed. Having seen so much in his two lives, he naturally wasn't fazed by Plenty's status. He was confident Asskickers United would grow to be no weaker than Fallen Angel at their prime!

"I didn't expect you to hide in plain sight by pretending to be a member of the Evil Faction! I'm surprised you managed to get past the guards. I assume you used some sort of alignment-concealing accessory?" Plenty asked. His knowledge of the Mad Rogue was limited to only a handful of videos, However, it was enough recognize Nie Yan as an important personage of the Viridian Empire. Only a few members of the Righteous Faction were worthy of his attention: Angyi Tianshi from Angel Corps, Mad Blade from

Bloodlust Blades, and Nirvana Flame from Asskickers United.

“A necklace.”

“How long does the disguise last?”

“Three hours.” Nie Yan decided there was no need to conceal this information.

“Three hours! Yours is much better than mine,” Plenty exclaimed as he took out a black ring. It featured a nail-sized black gemstone that gleamed with a dark light. “Here’s mine. It only hides my alignment for half an hour.”

Nie Yan was startled for a moment when Plenty admitted he possessed a similar item. Even when most players were over Level 100, very few had faction-disguising items. However, it made sense. Even if equipment with such effects were rare, it wasn’t too far-fetched for the guild leader of the Undead Empire’s biggest guild to have one already.

Nie Yan knew better than anyone what two pieces of faction-disguising equipment meant!

It was easy for the NPC guards to track illegal trade between factions, but this didn’t account for the ability to change one’s alignment. With two pieces of faction-disguising equipment, a pair of business partners could easily make trades free of oversight. However, they would still have to be careful when making the transaction. People had done this in the previous timeline, to mixed results. Some made a fortune and got off scot-free, while others were imprisoned and had their illegal assets seized.

However, under the allure of immense profit, many still took the risk. It wasn’t easy to go from the surface to the Underworld or vice versa. Players had to traverse the Gates of Hell and Endless Caverns. It was extremely dangerous, living up to the saying that great rewards came with great risk.

“How about we form a partnership?” Plenty asked knowingly. As

he waited for Nie Yan's reply, he sipped his drink with a carefree smile on his face. In the face of such potential riches, he refused to believe Nie Yan could resist his offer.

Nie Yan took a deep breath and paused for a moment. Exchanging equipment from the two factions would be an incredibly lucrative business. The possible profit was utterly incalculable! He replied, "I can think about it."

Asskickers United and Fallen Angel certainly wouldn't clash with each other anytime soon. Even if a war between factions broke out, such behemoths with shared interests would naturally avoid each other.

A partnership would be a win-win situation!

"How long does it take for you to go through the Gates of Hell and Endless Caverns? I tasked people with finding a route through once, but they couldn't do it. They estimated that players would have to be around Level 100 before even being able to make a serious attempt.

Plenty looked intently at Nie Yan, genuinely curious this time. Just how did he get here?

"I didn't take that route, but I'm afraid I'll have to keep my means of transportation a secret for now." Even if they were partnering up, Nie Yan couldn't lay all his cards out on the table.

"So you didn't go through those danger zones. No wonder!"

"I can probably make a trip every 10 days," Nie Yan said. The Dark Portal could be used every 5 days, so if their partnership went through he could trade five bags' worth of equipment every 10 days.

The two of them fleshed out a rough outline of their cooperation and exchanged contact information. Nie Yan gave Plenty his phone number, since real-life phones couldn't be traced to either faction. Every time he came to the Underworld, he would use it to call

Plenty and inform him of his location. Fallen Angel would immediately send someone disguised as a member of the Righteous Faction to take the surface equipment from Nie Yan. Then, Nie Yan would receive the Underworld equipment from a separate individual while disguised as a member of the Evil faction. Finally, Nie Yan would return to the surface to sell the smuggled goods for a massive profit.

Most smugglers from the previous timeline did things this way. Because faction-disguising equipment was simply too rare, it was very difficult to run into someone from the opposing faction who had one. Plus, it was far too difficult to pass the Gates of Hell and go through the Endless Caverns. Usually, only a massive team could make this journey with any sort of reliability, so the expenses were sky-high. Topping off all these hardships was the sheer danger of the act itself. If even the slightest mishap happened with their trade, the whole operation could get exposed and both sides would be in deep trouble.

Because Nie Yan could go through the Dark Portal, the transaction costs were practically negated. However, they still had to be extremely cautious when making the trades.

This wasn't unlike what Nie Yan's parents did in the real world. Harsh government regulations and strictly enforced customs still couldn't eliminate the problem of smuggling, so people took the risk to smuggle rare goods for sky-high prices.

Nie Yan and Plenty began discussing the details of their partnership. Plenty ordered his men to go gather items for Nie Yan to bring back to the surface. Night Vision equipment and similarly specialized equipment weren't all that valuable in the Underworld, but were worth hundreds of times more on the surface.

"You should give that Black Kingsnake Shield you picked up back to us. After all, it's not that useful for you," Plenty tried to persuade Nie Yan. To Fallen Angel, that shield was still of vital importance.

Nie Yan thought for a moment. Even if the Black Kingsnake Shield was valuable, it was still only around 5,000 gold. If his trade deal with Fallen Angel went through, he would make far more than just that amount.

“Once your men come back with all the equipment, I’ll take that chance to trade them the shield,” Nie Yan replied. Trading equipment was much safer than dealing with money.

Plenty thought for a moment before understanding Nie Yan’s meaning. He nodded in understanding. “Sure.”

He raised his glass and toasted, “A pleasure doing business with you.”

“And with you too,” Nie Yan smiled. Making direct contact with the leader of Fallen Angel saved him a ton of trouble.

“You have to be careful. Don’t get exposed, or the Evil Guards will be after you.”

“I know my limits,” Nie Yan reassured. If he got on the Evil Guards’ watchlist, he would have no place in the Underworld from then on out. Even worse, they would carefully monitor any transactions dealing with him.

“To avoid suspicion, I’ll leave first. We can communicate further outside the game.”

“Alright.”

Plenty stood up and left the tavern as Warlance followed closely behind.

Watching Plenty’s back disappear through the doorway, Nie Yan mused about his ignorance of Plenty’s background. He would have to ask Guo Huai and Ah Chen to look into him. Someone who could gather so much power in the Underworld certainly wouldn’t have a simple origin.

As Nie Yan sat in the tavern, he tried to remember as much as he

could about the previous Fallen Angel. Suddenly, he recalled a tidbit that made him chuckle: Fallen Angel and Angel Corps weren't on good terms in the past. With Angel Corps' Angyi Tianshi and Fallen Angel's Plenty both leading an Angel guild on opposite factions, things were going to get interesting.

Finally, quite some time after Plenty left, Nie Yan got up and exited the tavern. He went in search for a market of sorts to buy some basic consumables. Since he would be in the Underworld for three more days, he needed to restock on supplies.

Chapter 349 – Soul Pendant

Nie Yan relied on his experience to navigate the village. He quickly found the general store and stepped inside.

He was greeted by an old goblin shopkeeper in a black gown, who stood about half as tall as the average person. His skin was green and wrinkly. His back was so badly hunched even taking a single step was physically taxing.

Nie Yan was surprised this old goblin's faction alignment was neutral.

Neutral NPCs also appeared in many high-level towns in the Viridian Empire. They sold a variety of goods and even gave out quests every once in a blue moon. And when war broke out between both factions, they would stand on the sidelines.

Goblin Garnes (Elite): Level 60

The old goblin glanced at Nie Yan, a fathomless light flashing in his eyes.

Nie Yan felt like his every secret was completely exposed. He clutched the Unknown Transfer Scroll in his pocket. This old goblin wasn't simple. He felt a slight tremble from Bennett's Journal in his bag, whereupon a gray ball of light rose up from the pages and hovered beside him.

“Dear Customer, how may I help you?” asked Goblin Garnes.

A shop window appeared in front of Nie Yan's eyes and displayed a variety of goods which included potions, spring water, and bread. He stuffed one of his bags to the brim with consumables, then turned his attention to an item that caught his eye from the start, a blue potion with a strange open-mouthed bottle design. The liquid inside was turbid with chunks of mystery matter floating above its surface.

Nie Yan inspected the potion.

Soul Potion: Unknown Effect

Price: 600 gold

Noticing Nie Yan's eyes on the potion, Goblin Garnes said, "This is a Soul Potion. Rumours say it allows you to peer into the deepest memories of a deceased soul. It's sold in many potion shops."

Nie Yan met eyes with Goblin Garnes whose gaze seemed to pierce his soul.

Nie Yan pondered for a moment before buying a Soul Potion. It was worth the price if it could help him progress in Empress Finas' quest.

"Objects with souls contain powerful magical power. Necromancers often use them to create sinister magical tools. Youngster, make sure no Necromancer catches sight of that journal of yours," Goblin Garnes advised.

"Thank you, wise sir," Nie Yan said respectfully. He reached out and held the ball of light in his palm.

Nie Yan bid Goblin Garnes farewell. He browsed around the other shops in Valitin to see if there were any special items for sale. The goods sold here couldn't be found on the surface, after all.

Nie Yan found a few other items that caught his eye after browsing through six shops and numerous player-owned stalls.

Soul Pendant (3)

Requirements: 300 Strength

Properties: Adds 50 extra slots of inventory space (consumables only), Night Vision +2, Dark Awareness +3.

Nie Yan bought the Soul Pendant from a Level 45 player. It appeared such trinkets were widespread in the Underworld and could be crafted by Dark Shamans. Since players frequently lost their way in the Underworld, often going days without finding a town to resupply at, the need for inventory space was a lot greater

than on the surface. This led to players from the Evil Faction having larger bags and an additional pendant that further increased inventory space.

This Soul Pendant was quite useful. It would free up a lot of inventory space for equipment.

When Nie Yan stepped into a scroll shop, he found Junior Death Wave Scrolls for sale at 2 gold a piece. They required 100 Intelligence to use and dealt 1,000 damage to all living creatures in a 20 meter radius. Naturally, they were ineffective against machine and dark-type creatures.

Fortunately, Nie Yan's Intelligence had long since surpassed 100 points. These Death Wave Scrolls were of little use in the Underworld because the vast majority of creatures here were of the dark attribute. Despite being sold so cheaply, no one ever bought them. However, if he could bring them back to the surface, they would definitely be useful for levelling, maybe even more so than some high-level scrolls. He planned to stock up on them before returning to the surface.

Nie Yan couldn't help but lament after learning that bags in the Underworld were much larger than on the surface. If he had known this earlier, he would've long since gotten someone to get him some.

Life's a Drama came to mind. However, Nie Yan didn't dare to directly contact him. He could only deliver a message by proxy.

"I'm here! What do you need?" Life's a Drama said while still panting for breath. He had rushed over in a great hurry.

Nie Yan asked Life's a Drama to head over to Necropolis City and buy him five 50-slot bags. With them, he would have a lot more inventory space. He was a little apprehensive when handing over the gold because he would have zero recourse if Life's a Drama just took the money and ran. However, Life's a Drama didn't betray his trust and returned with the bags shortly after.

Nie Yan's trust in Life's a Drama increased. When the opportunity presented itself, he could have Life's a Drama run small errands for him.

Even though Life's a Drama was puzzled why Nie Yan didn't just go and buy the bags himself, he didn't pry.

Nie Yan chatted with Life's a Drama for a bit. When he saw the three hours were almost up, he bid Life's a Drama farewell and followed the stream of players out of the village.

Nie Yan melted in the darkness and headed north.

Nie Yan released his hand to find the ball of light had disappeared. He searched around and and saw it hovering around him.

It had become a lot more active after meeting Goblin Garnes.

"I should go levelling," Nie Yan mused. At this moment, a mysterious voice rang in his head. The ball of light was constantly urging him north, as if it was trying to guide him somewhere.

Nie Yan followed the ball of light as it led him farther and farther north. It would never stray too far away for him, waiting for him to catch up if he lagged too far behind.

Quest Progress: Under the guidance of Bennett's Soul, the brave adventurer searches for traces of Empress Finas.

Nie Yan sank into deep thought after seeing this notification. Empress Finas wouldn't be weak. It probably wasn't suitable for him to track her down at his current level. However, there was no harm in taking a look. If he encountered danger, he could just teleport away with an Unknown Transfer Scroll. He had brought a full stack of them with him on this trip to the Underworld.

Nie Yan passed through the vast wilderness and arrived at a mountain range, where he wandered aimlessly about for a long time, having lost all sense of direction.

You have discovered Spider Gorge.

Nie Yan looked up ahead and spotted giant spiders roaming around. One of them was crawling in his direction.

Nie Yan activated Transcendent Insight.

Rum Spider: Level 60

Health: 2,000/2,000

Spider-type monsters had relatively low health. However, their paralyzing venom was extremely frightening, so many players tended to avoid them if possible. They were some of the most difficult monsters to deal with.

Nie Yan summoned Lil' Gold, then fired his crossbow at one of the Rum Spiders.

「Put! Put! Put!」Five bolts struck the Rum Spider in quick succession, whereupon it immediately aggroed onto Nie Yan.

Lil' Gold intercepted the Rum Spider and blasted it with Dragon Breath.

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Nie Yan stood safely behind Lil' Gold and repeatedly used Undead Rite on the Rum Spider.

Undead Rite has failed!

Undead Rite has failed!

...

The Rum Spider spat out a glob of venom at Lil' Gold. It sizzled and let out smoke, but it failed to corrode his golden scales.

Thanks to Lil Gold's strong poison resistance, the Rum Spider's venom only dealt 321 damage.

Before long, the Rum Spider collapsed dead on the ground.

Nie Yan continued hunting Rum Spiders. He finally succeeded in

taking control of one of them with Undead Rite after killing over several dozen. He quickly started expanding his army of spiders.

His levelling speed immediately skyrocketed.

Level 60 mobs surely gave generous experience.

About an hour later, a crisp jingle rang out. Nie Yan had finally reached Level 40. He put all his stat points into Dexterity, then allocated his mastery points into Adept Hands, Dual Wielding, and Dagger Mastery. His health also rose to just over 2,500.

Ever since obtaining the Chapter of Peace and Chapter of Compassion, Nie Yan received a noticeable increase in the amount of health he gained every level.

Lil' Gold led Nie Yan's squad of Rum Spiders deeper into Spider Gorge, sweeping away everything in their path.

Nie Yan arrived at the top of a raised rock formation after killing 200 odd Rum Spiders. He looked down at the valley below and saw a dense crowd of Rum Spiders. It was as if a hairy carpet covered the ground.

At times like this, Nie Yan wished he had Tang Yao around. A nicely placed area-of-effect spell was just what he needed, preferably fire magic since it dealt bonus damage to spider-type monsters.

Nie Yan looked around. There were cliff walls all around him. Ordinary players would be forced to clear away these Rum Spiders to get past. However, he could just use the Crawler Ring.

Nie Yan thought for a moment. It wasn't every day he encountered such a good grinding spot. It would be a waste to leave just like this.

Nie Yan rummaged through his inventory and took out two Advanced Scrolls and five Intermediate Scrolls. I should stock up on more Advanced Scrolls with area-of-effect magic next time.

Chapter 350 – Conjuring Skull

The cold winds howled as sharp cries rang out in the darkness. Nie Yan created a huge commotion by ordering his Rum Spiders to start wantonly attacking their own in the valley below.

Nie Yan hurriedly gave the order to retreat. His Rum Spiders started running back to him, with a swarm of hostile Rum Spiders lagging not too far behind.

He took out an Advanced Scroll and started chanting series of cryptic syllables as magical energy swirled around him.

Nie Yan had 122 Intelligence, something hardly seen among Thieves. This was thanks to humans having higher Intelligence than other races, and a host of items on him that boosted his Intelligence, such as the chapters from the Book of Order.

Nie Yan's high Intelligence allowed him to use the vast majority of scrolls and magical tools without a problem.

The hostile Rum Spiders were getting ever closer. There were hundreds of them within a radius of 30 meters.

At this moment, Nie Yan finished chanting out the last syllable as a blazing cloud emerged in the sky and started raining down fire.

Everything within a 20 meter radius was engulfed in a raging inferno, resembling a scene straight out of hell. The Rum Spiders let out miserable shrieks as damage values rose up into the sky. Half a minute later, most of them lay dead on the ground.

Nie Yan saw his experience bar fill up to 73%. This was impressive given that he had levelled up just recently!

The blaze eventually died down, unveiling a tableau of devastation with charred corpses strewn everywhere. Nie Yan had lost two of his own Rum Spiders in the process. He finished off the remaining Rum Spiders in the vicinity, then started picking up the loot.

Nie Yan collected a total of 3 gold and a mountain of junk. He kept the valuable drops and left behind the rest to avoid bloating his inventory.

A certain piece of loot in particular caught Nie Yan's eye.

It was a black skull roughly the size of a fist. A sapphire gem was embedded into its forehead, and green flames flickered from its eye sockets.

Conjuring Skull (Medium)

Requirements: 500 Intelligence

Description: This Conjuring Skull is a medium for summoning undead creatures and spirits as servants. It can also be used to call forth a Bone Mammoth (Damaged).

Nie Yan didn't know the use of this Conjuring Skull. It seemed to be a special item meant for Necromancers. He wondered how valuable it was. After thinking it over, he tossed it into his bag.

Except for the Conjuring Skull, there was nothing else of interest. Nie Yan began purifying the corpses of the Rum Spiders. They dissolved into motes of light before disappearing into the air.

Nie Yan continued hunting the Rum Spiders. Time slowly passed by.

When it was time to log off, Nie Yan had reached Level 43. Lil' Gold reached Level 39, and wasn't far off from levelling up again. Lil' Gold also learned a new skill, Flame Shroud, which wrapped him in flames and inflicted burn damage to all enemies within a five meter radius.

Although pets would become more and more common as time passed, most of them would be low-level and possess terrible growth rates. Lil' Gold was definitely a unique existence among them.

Even Nie Yan couldn't estimate Lil' Gold's full potential.

Nie Yan spent the next two days levelling. When he used up all his scrolls, he had Lil' Gold blast the Rum Spiders with Dragon Breath. The levelling speed was decent to say the least. He had reached Level 47 and obtained quite a bit of loot.

Checking the level leaderboards, Tang Yao was still in the lead at Level 53. Bloodlust Mad Blade was also Level 53, but he was still lagging a bit behind. The Underworld was an unfamiliar place to Nie Yan. Back on the surface, his levelling speed would surely be several times faster.

Nie Yan had killed several thousand Rum Spiders without finding another item like the Conjuring Skull. He confirmed it was a precious drop that probably wasn't meant to be sold in a stall on the street.

Unsummoning Lil' Gold, Nie Yan looked in the distance. He didn't know what sort of secrets Spider Gorge contained. He had spent the past two days levelling in the outskirts, never once exploring deeper inside.

Nie Yan activated the Crawler Ring and began scaling the cliff walls. He occasionally encountered a spider den while advancing, whereupon he would hurriedly make a lengthy detour.

After passing through a narrow stretch of valley, Nie Yan could make out a few buildings in the distance. Their lights were faint in the darkness.

The ball of light hovering around Nie Yan seemed to sense something and started trembling in excitement.

You have discovered the Karasi Arachne Tribe.

It could be related to Empress Finas' quest. Nie Yan continued crawling and encountered a 10 meter wide river that cut through the valley. A dense layer of algae coated the water's surface and gave off a noxious stench. It was probably highly toxic! He put on the Leaper Ring and jumped over to the other side, sticking to the

cliff wall like a gecko.

Nie Yan crawled back to the ground. He entered stealth and began making his way towards the settlement in the distance.

This village appeared to be closed off from the rest of the world. It was surrounded on all four sides by cliff walls and a highly toxic river. It was impossible to reach the opposite bank without a special item like the Leaper Ring or Levitate Ring.

Nie Yan crossed a patch of trees and encountered an Arachne up ahead. He slowly drew closer and activated Transcendent Insight.

Arachne: Level 60

Health: 3,000/3,000

There were no others in the vicinity. Nie Yan approached the Arachne from behind.

The Arachne was hunting insects when Nie Yan launched a sneak attack with Zennarde's Sword.

The Arachne panicked and tried to run away. However, Nie Yan landed a Smothering Strike squarely on the back of its head. He followed up with Backstab and Eviscerate. Immediately, its corpse collapsed in front of his feet.

Nie Yan couldn't allow that Arachne to escape. It would have alerted the village to his presence.

Nie Yan activated the Pearl of Disguise, his appearance transforming into that of the Arachne he had just killed. He continued toward the village.

He encountered many Arachne along the way. They were either hunting insects or crafting various tools.

"Du-du-du, Darude..." Nie Yan heard strange sound coming from their mouths, as if they were saying something. However, he didn't understand any of it.

Conviction's language system was wonderful, containing a

variety of different languages with hundreds of dialects. For example, the Undead Language contained six dialects each with subtle differences. The players from the Undead Empired communicated in the Undead Language. If Nie Yan hadn't learned the Vanbiya Undead Language, he wouldn't have been able to understand a single word they said. The system automatically translated any language the player learned. When Nie Yan was talking to the players in Valitin Village, he was naturally speaking in the Undead Language. If a player visited a library to learn the language of another race, particularly one from an opposing faction, it would cost tens of thousands of gold.

This was an additional barrier to players from different factions communicating.

Nie Yan didn't know the language of the Arachne. It was simply too uncommon. He could only keep silent; otherwise, his cover would be blown.

The ball of light was still floating by Nie Yan's side. He had already spotted Elite-class Arachne in the vicinity. He was afraid of being discovered and clutched an Unknown Transfer Scroll in his hand, planning to teleport away at the first sign of trouble.

Nie Yan discovered the Arachne couldn't see the ball of light floating next to him. It was a faint light fluttering by his side just like a fairy. He guessed it was Bennet's soul. He wondered if it still had any of its memories. Was it possible to retrieve some clues by using the Soul Potion?

Nie Yan entered the village. Some of the the Arachne were chatting together in groups. Their ugly appearances were quite frightening in the darkness.

It was a village of horrors.

Some of the Arachne greeted Nie Yan when they spotted him. However, he didn't understand what they were saying, so he could only pretend he didn't hear them.

Nie Yan brushed past many Arachne on the muddy roads. He spotted a fairly grand building up ahead. It was three storeys tall with a flight of stairs connecting to the second floor. It looked a bit old, but it was the most conspicuous thing he had seen so far. He suspected it contained something important.

Nie Yan hesitated for a moment before sneaking into the building. He carefully searched around on the first and second floor but failed to find anything. When he climbed up to the third floor, he discovered two Arachne in plate armour guarding a Dark Gold-grade treasure chest tucked away in a corner. It was made out of some unknown material and was covered in mysterious runes and designs.

The two Arachne seemed to sense something. Their gaze swept over the staircase, but they failed to find anything and returned to their idle state.

Nie Yan inspected the two Arachne with Transcendent Insight.

Arachne Ilvitch (Elite): Level 60

Health 12,000/12,000

Arachne Israel (Elite): Level 60

Health: 11,700/11,700

Nie Yan frowned. It would be difficult for him to deal with two Elites all by himself. Furthermore, he couldn't create too much noise; otherwise, he would attract other Arachne to the scene.

Chapter 351 – Pygmy Ring

Nie Yan couldn't summon Lil' Gold in such a confined space, fearing his immense weight would cause the wooden building to collapse.

Nie Yan glanced at his skill bar. Killing one of the Elites in a short time was no problem, but he was afraid the second would alert the other Arachne over. Then, he would be completely surrounded.

It was mandatory to kill both Elite Arachne before they could rally their comrades!

Nie Yan's eyes lit up when his gaze fell on Divine Recruitment. He had a plan!

Nie Yan returned to the second floor. He opened Divine Recruitment and chose to employ the Rank 5 Paladin Khalisi, who had over 3,600 health and 150% of his other stats. With an employment fee of 300 gold/hr, he had to make every second count!

A silver-armoured Paladin wielding a greatsword emerged before Nie Yan. She was taller than him by a head with a lean and muscular build.

"Greetings, sir Devil Slayer! How may I be of service?" Khalisi asked in a respectful tone. Her mission, like the other Paladins from the Divine Recruitment skill, was to serve the Devil Slayer with absolute loyalty.

Nie Yan's party size increased by one. His newest member, Khalisi, would do anything he tasked her with. Her combat strength was unquestionable, in part thanks to the powerful skills at her disposal. There were over 20 blessings and 10 basic attack skills, including Holy Strike, Divine Punishment, and Purification.

Nie Yan had Khalisi cast five blessings on him, increasing all his stats by roughly 20%.

Nie Yan entered stealth and climbed back up to the third floor. He carefully hid in a corner.

The two Arachne Guards patrolling the third floor didn't detect Nie Yan's presence.

Nie Yan ordered Khalisi to climb up to the third floor. Her steps were purposefully loud to alert the two Arachne Guards. They immediately charged toward this intruder.

Khalisi greeted them with a swing of her greatsword, Holy Strike! Her blade lit up with a brilliant radiance.

At this moment, Nie Yan took action.

Gale Ambush!

Shadow Slaughter!

Apocalyptic Extinction!

Nie Yan dashed toward Arachne Ilvitch like a gust of wind and struck it in the back of the head with Smothering Strike.

The flames around Zennarde's Sword flared as Nie Yan followed up with Backstab, Eviscerate, and Lacerate.

-928

-939

-923...

Arachne Ilvitch was also inflicted with bleed, poison, and burn damage along with numerous other debuffs from Apocalyptic Extinction. Its health rapidly plummeted. The nearby Arachne Israel also took 30% splash damage from Shadow Slaughter.

Nie Yan's nerves were stretched taut. He absolutely couldn't allow these two Arachne to call for help!

Just as Arachne Ilvitch was about to break free from the stun, Nie Yan activated Extreme Intimidate, causing it to freeze in place.

Khalisi had also taken Arachne Israel to half-health by launching

all the basic attack skills in her arsenal.

Nie Yan repeatedly slashed and stabbed with Zennarde's Sword. He activated Blast, blowing Arachne Ilvitch several steps back, and then circled around and slashed its neck with Cut Throat.

-1656

-2478!

Arachne Ilvitch collapsed to the floor.

A cry escaped Arachne Israel's throat when it saw its companion die.

At this moment, Khalisi briefly immobilized Arachne Israel with a Charge, creating the opportunity for Nie Yan to dash in and stun it with Concussive Blow.

Nie Yan's Shadow Slaughter and Khali's attacks had already shaved away most of Arachne Israel's health.

Nie Yan unleashed a final flurry of attacks on Arachne Israel's back, while Khalisi slashed away at the front. Her attacks weren't to be underestimated. She was fully capable of dealing over 1,000 damage with each blow of her sword.

When the stun from Concussive Blow wore off, Arachne Israel stumbled a bit before falling to the floor.

Nie Yan collected the equipment that dropped on the ground. Sadly, they were restricted to the Evil Faction, so he could only sell them when he returned to Valitin Village.

Looking out the window sill, Nie Yan breathed out a sigh of relief. The sound of fighting hadn't alerted the other Arachne.

Nie Yan walked toward the Dark Gold treasure chest, hoping it would give him something useful. He bent down and started opening it.

About a minute later, the chest popped open with a click.

Nie Yan reached inside and felt two items. He pulled out the first which appeared to be a ring.

Pygmy Ring (Dark Gold): Special Item

Properties: Cloaking +20

Pygmy Transformation: Shrinks the player to one-third of their original size, greatly increasing their hiding ability and preventing them from being detected for 1 hour. Cooldown: 1 day

Restrictions: None

Nie Yan's eyebrows jumped in pleasant surprise. It was a special item which allowed him to shrink down to a third of his normal size. He imagined it would come in handy in some very specific situations, allowing him to hide in places people would never think of. Not to mention it enhanced his hiding ability and prevented him from being detected by a player's Awareness.

Nie Yan could already figure out some of the obvious uses for this Pygmy Ring. Its more unconventional uses would be revealed with time and research. He tossed it into his bag.

Nie Yan jumped up in fright when he examined the second item he pulled out of the chest. It was a skeletal hand!

Cursed Arachne Hand (Fate Item)

Description: Summons a 16-sided die. 1–8 will inflict the player with a curse. 9–16 will reward the player with a blessing.

Note: This item will disappear if it isn't used within 20 seconds.

It was a Fate Item!

Fate Items were more commonplace in the Underworld. This was because Necromancers had a skill that could affect the rolls of Fate Dice. Many Necromancers liked to take a gamble with Fate Items since the rewards were usually well worth the risk.

Nie Yan felt a headache after seeing another Fate Item. He recalled his painful experience with the Cursed Skull.¹

It was easy to invite disaster when testing your luck!

A middle roll was bearable since both the curses and rewards wouldn't be too severe. However, a low roll like a 1 or a 2 would instantly consign a player to their doom.

Nie Yan would be more inclined to try his luck if he had a skill like the Necromancers that could influence the roll of a die. Coin tosses were much less fun. Even some Necromancers would be forced to delete their characters and start over after a particularly unlucky encounter with a Fate Item.

The Cursed Arachne Hand pulsed with a strange energy as if it was beckoning something.

Just as Nie Yan was about to give up on the Cursed Arachne Hand, the ball of light beside him began dancing excitedly around the skeletal hand.

Nie Yan suddenly recalled a rumour he heard in the previous timeline. Apparently, souls could affect the tides of destiny. This was why Necromancers, the class with the closest ties to the occult, could influence the outcome of Fate Dice. Looking at the ball of light, he began to wonder if Bennett's Soul could help improve his odds.

Just as the Cursed Arachne Hand was about to disappear, Nie Yan gritted his teeth and activated it. Time suddenly froze to a standstill as a giant bone-white die with 16 sides emerged floating in the air before him. The ancient characters carved into its facets glowed with a bewitching red light.

Bennett's Soul was still floating around Nie Yan. It was unaffected by the frozen time.

Nie Yan's mind trembled. It appeared the rumour he heard about souls being able to affect Fate Items was true!

The white Fate Die began spinning at a dizzying speed. The rapidly changing numbers turned into a blur.

Nie Yan took a deep breath as he stared at the Fate Die. He would be lying if he said he wasn't nervous.

Nie Yan suddenly had an idea. He let out a shout and activated Eye of Truth.

His eyes flashed with a profound light. The numbers were still a blur. However, he could vaguely make some of them out. It appeared the die was spinning a bit slower.

Fate Dice really couldn't be controlled. Players could only use a variety of methods to increase the odds of a favourable roll.

Relying on his intuition, Nie Yan reached out his hand to touch the die.

"Stop!" Nie Yan shouted, whereupon the spinning die immediately came to a halt.

Nie Yan focused on the number displayed in front of him.

15, it was a shocking roll!

Nie Yan's heart was beating rapidly. He was incredibly excited.

The die melted into the air.

You have been rewarded by destiny, Health +20%.

What a frightening increase!

Nie Yan checked his health. It had risen to over 3,000! He could be considered quite sturdy among Thieves. It was a pity he was a leather-armoured class. If he were a heavy-armoured class like a Fighter, he would be unparalleled at his current level.

Time started moving again as everything returned to normal. Nie Yan couldn't calm down for a long time. He had gained 500 health without having to level up at all! Just how wonderful was this?

1. Nie Yan finds the Cursed Skull at the end of Chapter 77. He rolls the Fate Dice it summons in Chapter 78.

Chapter 352 – Empress Finas' Fang

Disguise was dispelled the moment Nie Yan attacked the two Arachne Guards. He would have to wait a day for it to go back off cooldown. As such, he could only rely on his stealth skills from now on.

Nie Yan pondered for a moment before replacing his Crawler Ring which was still on cooldown with the Pygmy Ring.

After recalling Paladin Khalisi, Nie Yan snuck out of the building while in stealth. He carefully tread through the shadows, occasionally encountering Arachne in his path. Without a skill like disguise, it was almost impossible to pass through such a monster dense region undetected.

Nie Yan took every step with caution for fear of slipping up in even the slightest. He turned a corner and spotted seven Elite Arachne with sinister appearances up ahead. They carried giant scythes and tightly patrolled the area.

This block of the street was sealed off by them. Nie Yan spotted the dancing light of a bonfire with the shadows of figures swaying in the distance. It appeared the Arachne were holding some grand event like a ritual sacrifice.

The Elite Arachne had blocked off the path ahead, leaving a single gap guarded by giant scythes whose blades were ready to come down at any time.

Nie Yan wondered if the Pygmy Ring could prove its use right now. He activated Pygmy Transformation as his body rapidly shrunk to a third of its original size.

What a fascinating skill!

Everything around him appeared much larger, including the huts, piles of junk, and seven Elite Arachne up ahead, who looked even more frightening than before. It was like Nie Yan was

transported into a world of giants!

Nie Yan was a little disoriented, but he quickly adapted to this new perspective. He leaped over a massive boulder and stuck to the nooks of the huts as he made his way toward the bonfire.

A large mouse popped out of a hole in the side of a hut while chewing on something in its front paws. It looked around warily before returning from where it came.

Nie Yan was frightened by the appearance of this mouse. From his perspective, it was as large as a wolf!

With his shrunken size, Nie Yan's speed saw a steep decline.

Nie Yan slowly approached the Elite Arachne. He lamented at how large they were compared to him. He couldn't even reach to their shoulders even if he jumped with all his might. Meanwhile, they could send him flying with a simple sweep of their scythes.

The Arachne started to stir as if they sensed something. Nie Yan quickly halted his steps. They looked around but failed to find anything, and then returned to their passive states after muttering some unintelligible words.

Little did they know Nie Yan was actually right beside their feet! He slipped through the gaps between their legs and ducked out of their sight behind a corner.

It was easier than Nie Yan expected!

Nie Yan passed through a narrow alley and arrived at an open square. There was an altar with a blazing bonfire at the center surrounded by a dense crowd of Arachne. An Elder Arachne stood high atop a platform. His skin was old and wrinkled like tree bark, and his back was so badly hunched even taking a single step was difficult. He held a wooden staff in one hand and in the other a crimson thorn, which glittered brilliantly under the glow of the flames.

A young Arachne girl was bound to a wooden pole above the

bonfire. She wore a fatigued expression on her face.

The Elder Arachne mumbled out some gibberish and waved its staff as magical energy began swirling around his hand.

They seemed to be performing some sort of ancient ritual.

Nie Yan could hear voices speaking periodically, but he sadly couldn't understand their meaning.

Bennett's soul started to bounce around wildly. It immediately flew toward the thorn in the Elder Arachne's hand.

Nie Yan's gaze focused on the thorn. It was roughly five inches in size and looked like the fang of a creature, with veiny patterns on its surface. It emitted a red lustre, as if it were sculpted out of ruby.

A voice seemed to clamor in Nie Yan's mind: "Get it! Get it!"

The Elder Arachne emitted a loud hiss before mumbling out a series of strange syllable. He suddenly lifted the thorn and stabbed down in the young Arachne girl's arm. The thorn seemed to come alive, its veins pulsing wildly as it sucked her dry of her blood while emitting a bright red glow.

Around 15 minutes later, the ritual ended. The dying young Arachne girl was carried down from the platform. The Elder Arachne inserted the thorn into the center of the altar.

Bennet's Soul was circling around the thorn.

Quest Progress: Acquire Empress Finas' Fang.

It turned out the thorn was the fang of Empress Finas!

It should be a quest item, Nie Yan thought. It wouldn't be easy to obtain Empress Finas' Fang with so many Arachne around. He confirmed he could still use the Unknown Transfer Scroll and felt reassured.

Still in his diminished form, Nie Yan tiptoed toward the altar while avoiding the spiders all around him.

An Arachne walked in his direction, but Nie Yan hurriedly rolled behind a rock. He proceeded with even more care, hiding behind rocks and patches of grass wherever possible.

The crowd of Arachne began celebrating after the ritual was over. Nie Yan had no clue what was going on because of the language barrier, nor did he really care. He had his eyes set on Empress Finas' Fang and nothing else.

The Elder Arachne sat several meters from the altar. His withered husk of a body looked like it could collapse at any moment. However, Nie Yan knew this old bag of bones was absolutely the most dangerous being among them.

Nie Yan suspected the Elder Arachne was a Lord-class monster. Not daring to be negligent, he activated Shadow Waltz to further increase his stealth.

Nie Yan's stealth was extremely high, almost on the level of Great Thieves at Level 70. However, he still couldn't afford a single lapse of judgement.

Prudence allowed a ship to sail for 10,000 years!

It seemed the Elder Arachne had gotten bored as he stood up from his seat and started wandering farther and farther away from the altar.

An opportunity! Nie Yan took the chance to creep closer to Empress Finas' Fang.

The Elder Arachne suddenly turned back to look at the fang. Reassured it was still there, his expression relaxed a bit as he looked around carefully.

Nie Yan froze in place as cold sweat dripped down from his neck. The Elder Arachne's gaze was piercing like a dagger, causing his hair to stand on end.

Discovering nothing, the Elder Arachne finally turned and slowly walked farther away from the altar.

When the Elder Arachne had wandered more than 10 meters away, Nie Yan rushed toward the altar and grabbed Empress Finas' Fang. At this moment, he felt an intense burning sensation in his palm. He heard a sizzling sound and saw smoke rise up from his glove.

The unexpected sensation caught Nie Yan off guard, causing him to reflexively let go of the fang, which fell onto the ground.

A damage value of over 1,000 floated up above his head and his figure slowly became visible.

Not good, I've been found!

The surrounding Arachne began clamoring angrily, pointing at him and making enraged screeching noises. Several of them even furiously charged toward him.

The Elder Arachne turned around and let out a deep hiss. He waved his staff and spat out a few syllables as black magical energy started swirling around him. The shadows surrounding Nie Yan seemed to come alive and shot toward him. A heavy pressure descended on him, threatening to crush his very being.

Nie Yan activated Gale Step, relying on the first three seconds of invincibility to avoid the Elder Arachne's spell. He tossed Empress Finas' Fang into his bag. If it wasn't for this skill, he would've immediately released his grip!

The venom on Empress Finas' Fang was simply too potent. Just a few seconds of skin contact was enough to kill him.

The Elder Arachne let out a string of curses and sent a wave of black lava surging in Nie Yan's direction.

With a loud bang, half the altar was destroyed. However, Nie Yan was already gone.

The moment he secured Empress Finas' Fang, Nie Yan crushed an Unknown Transfer Scroll. His vision blurred for a moment before yet another gloomy scene revealed itself to him. It seemed

to be a desert of some sort, but Nie Yan disregarded it. He opened his map to check his coordinates and set out toward Valitin Village.

Nie Yan checked his status bar and noticed something strange.

Fury of Elder Arachne Kasil: You have incited the wrath of Elder Arachne Kasil. He is searching everywhere for your trail.

After reading this debuff, Nie Yan didn't dare to take any risks. He immediately crushed a Haste Scroll and began sprinting towards safety.

Nie Yan dashed through the wilderness. He was extremely far away from Valitin Village. It would take him at least half an hour to get there. After passing through a stretch of barren wasteland, a silhouette appeared in his path less than 15 meters away. It was Elder Arachne Kasil!

Kasil waved his staff, blotting out the sky with black clouds which rained down torrent of flames.

Nie Yan had no idea how this damn spider fogey caught up to him so quickly.

Just as he was about to be engulfed by Kasil's spell, Nie Yan once again crushed an Unknown Transfer Scroll and teleported away.

Nie Yan reappeared in a dense jungle. He ascertained his location before immediately running towards Valitin Village at maximum speed. Using all the speed boosting abilities at his disposal, he dashed out from the trees and flitted across a vast grassland.

Chapter 353 – Departure

Nie Yan was forced to use Unknown Transfer Scrolls again and again in an attempt to escape Elder Arachne Kasil's pursuit. Finally, he was sent to a location only three minutes away from Valitin Village. He immediately sprinted toward the town like a madman, practically flying over the ground.

Nie Yan would be out of luck if he couldn't get away this time. His supply of Unknown Transfer Scrolls was rapidly dwindling.

In the distance, specks of light began to appear in Nie Yan's vision, growing brighter and more numerous as he approached. The twinkling lights were a relief to him, like a lifeline for a drowning man.

Nie Yan once more burst forth at maximum speed during this final stretch, zipping closer and closer to Valitin Village.

Suddenly, a large shadowy figure appeared before him, hovering a meter off the ground. It waved the staff in its hand, conjuring a black fireball that shot out at Nie Yan before he even got a good look at it.

Nie Yan grimaced under the pressure of the black fireball cast by Elder Arachne Kasil as he considered his options. He activated Gale Step and slammed into the projectile, causing it to explode into a firework of cinders.

Nie Yan threw out a pouch of Flash Powder and blinded Kasil. He then slid under him and sprinted past.

Nie Yan hastily swapped factions as the entrance to Valitin Village entered his sight, hoping to dear god no one had noticed him.

Luckily, the nearby players were distracted by the appearance of Kasil. Why would a Level 60 Lord appear so close to town? Several Necromancers quickly reacted by summoning swaths of skeletons.

Elder Arachne Kasil waved his staff in annoyance, summoning a sea of black fire that instantly evaporated the mass of skeletons around him. The Necromancers stared in shock, almost unwilling to believe their eyes. This old man was way too strong!

“Shit! It’s a Lord-class Level 60 monster!”

“Everybody, run!”

However, their shouts came too late. By the time people were able to react, Kasil had already cast an area-of-effect spell to rain down black flames on the entire area. Like the skeletons before them, these players were quickly melted away and their bodies dissolved into motes of black light.

Having brushed aside the players in his way, Kasil continued chasing after Nie Yan.

More and more Evil Faction players gathered near the entrance, and several Spectral Knights already began advancing. They prepared to block the boss.

“Everyone, attack this Lord-class monster!”

The Spectral Knights engaged, stepping up to stop Kasil as the Mages in the back began casting spells at it. However, Kasil continuously waved his staff, one-shotting players left and right. Finally, he cast another area-of-effect spell laying waste to the entire front-line and causing the backline to fall into a panic. This boss was too powerful!

Kasil carved a path of blood toward Nie Yan, massacring players like pigs in a slaughterhouse. Wave after wave of Evil Faction players collapsed onto the ground.

Finally, someone realized Kasil was no ordinary Lord, but rather a Variant Lord! The crowd quickly scattered, not wanting to die pointlessly.

Fortunately for Nie Yan, they had bought him quite a bit of time. He finally reached the gates of Valitin Village, where he slowed

down to a walk and hid his face with a long cowl before approaching the guards.

Kasil was still rushing angrily towards him, causing Nie Yan to be distressed. However, if he tried to rush into the village, he would certainly draw a lot of unwanted attention from the guards.

Two of Valitin Village's skeletal guards suddenly noticed Kasil rushing towards the town. Brandishing their massive halberds, they charged at him in perfect harmony.

Alarm bells started ringing across the entire village. Several NPC Necromancers rushed out, summoning countless skeletons to form a dense wave of bones that blocked Kasil's path into the town.

The tide of skeletons quickly grew and wrapped around Kasil to completely surround him.

As Nie Yan quietly entered the village, he could see many groups of players rushing towards the source of the commotion.

"I heard a monster is attacking Valitin Village! Apparently it's a Level 60 Variant Lord!"

"Let's go take a look. Maybe we can get lucky and snag some of its drops!"

The flood of players began to fill the area, enclosing Kasil in a flood of summons and players. Kasil continued waving its staff to instantly clear entire groups of skeletons. The Necromancers, not to be outdone, waved their staffs in response and counterattacked by summoning more and casting their own spells.

Flashes of light lit up the darkness as various spells took form and bombarded Kasil.

The outskirts of Valitin Village was transformed into a chaotic battlefield!

Nie Yan couldn't help but find this situation a little similar to the time he lured the Guardian of Order to Link Town. It wouldn't be

long before Elder Arachne Kasil was killed. And no one would know he was behind this event. Checking the time, he could open a portal and return to the surface in about an hour.

Nie Yan started cleaning out his bags, first by selling off all his potions and other consumables to the NPC shops. Afterwards, he had Life's a Drama head to Necropolis City in his place and auction off all the equipment he picked up during his travels. To compensate him for his hard work, Nie Yan offered him a portion of the profit.

The only items remaining were the Black Kingsnake Shield and the mysterious Conjuring Skull. Even his Soul Pendant was emptied out, though not for long. Nie Yan made a trip to the Scroll Shop and filled it up with 50 full stacks of Death Wave Scrolls.

A while later, Nie Yan and Plenty met up in the run-down tavern at the appointed time.

Plenty and Proud Warlance were both present. They also brought along two other members of Fallen Angel, their confidantes.

"Did you bring everything?" Nie Yan asked, wondering what sort of items Plenty prepared for him.

Plenty glanced at Warlance and the two other Fallen Angel players, who promptly showed the items to Nie Yan. "Take a look, there's 270 pieces of equipment in total. Just in case you didn't have enough space, we've also brought along five 56-slot bags."

Nie Yan never expected Plenty to prepare bags for him as well. Looking over the items, there were 180 pieces of equipment with at least Night Vision +10, 60 pieces of equipment with Focus +30 or higher, and 30 pieces of equipment with other stat bonuses which were hard to find on the surface.

"This is about 20,000 gold's worth of equipment. I'm sure you'll earn a staggering amount by smuggling them back to the surface." Plenty gazed at Nie Yan, then continued, "I hope you don't forget

our agreement. I'm expecting to hear word from you in five days."

"Rest assured I won't bail out. I'm confident there'll be many more opportunities for cooperation to come," Nie Yan replied with a smile. A cooperative relationship with Fallen Angel was absolutely beneficial to the growth of Asskickers United.

Nie Yan estimated he would earn 1,000,000 gold, maybe even more, by selling all this equipment on the surface!

Nie Yan handed back the Black Kingsnake Shield to Plenty and further compensated him with 10,000 gold. Like this, all debts were fairly settled. Even if the guards of the Undead Empire discovered his identity, they could simply deny knowing he was a player from the Righteous Faction since he was disguised as a member of the Evil Faction when they traded with him. The system had no way of reading their minds.

As long as Nie Yan made sure he wasn't exposed, they could continue carrying out their smuggling trade.

"You're the one who brought that Level 60 Variant Lord here?" Plenty asked. He had a vague suspicion Nie Yan was the one behind this mess.

"How's the situation outside?" Nie Yan asked with a faint smile, not denying anything.

"That Elder Arachne is pretty strong. He's killed three of the NPCs in Valitin Village and over 180 players. However, he won't last much longer." Plenty couldn't help but view Nie Yan in a new light, wondering just how he managed to lead such a powerful Variant Lord from deep in the wilderness all the way to Valitin Village.

During this time, Plenty had done a thorough investigation of Nie Yan's background. He more or less had an understanding of Asskickers United.

The Evil Faction and Righteous Faction didn't have any contact.

The frontier wouldn't open up until the players were at least Level 100. For the time being, no one could spare any attention for the opposing faction. However, right now Asskickers United and Fallen Angel were collaborating together. This was truly unprecedented in both timelines.

"That Variant Lord should have some pretty good drops. Don't miss the opportunity," Nie Yan reminded Plenty.

Fallen Angel's forces had already assembled in Valitin Village. Monsters killed by NPCs wouldn't drop any items, unless players also dealt some damage. But with the NPCs helping out, it saved them a lot of trouble.

"This is only thanks to you leading that Variant Lord to the village," Plenty said with a faint smile.

This matter had led to both sides benefitting.

"Oh, one more thing. Can you take a look at this?" Nie Yan placed the Conjuring Skull on the table.

"A Conjuring Skull!?" Plenty blurted out in surprise, failing to hide his shock. It was actually one that summoned a Bone Mammoth too! "Where did you get this?"

"It dropped while I was hunting Rum Spiders," Nie Yan replied. He could instantly tell the Conjuring Skull wasn't simple based on Plenty's intense reaction. It was definitely a precious item worth at least 10,000 gold.

"You really have some amazing luck, to actually get something like this from hunting Rum Spiders. I can assure you the drop rate is at best 1 in 500,000. Sell this Conjuring Skull to me. I'll give you 30,000 gold for it, which is the market price. Ordinary Conjuring Skulls only sell for a few thousand gold. But since yours can summon a Bone Mammoth, it's worth a lot more," Plenty said straightforwardly. The price he offered was fair. Since they were going to cooperate in the future, he wouldn't damage their

relationship over something small like this.

“What’s the Conjuring Skull used for?” Nie Yan asked curiously. He was blown away by why this ordinary looking skull was so precious.

Chapter 354 – Akeph's Hand of Knowledge

“It’s a medium that allows Necromancers to summon one or two additional undead,” Plenty explained.

Nie Yan naturally understood how an item which bolstered the size of an undead army would be highly sought after by Necromancers, especially if its drop rate was abysmally low. Furthermore, the Conjuring Skull in his possession was one of the rarer kinds.

The price Plenty offered should be fair. However, Nie Yan felt it’d be a waste to sell an item like the Conjuring Skull for gold.

“How about we exchange for equipment instead?” Nie Yan suggested. “A large guild like Fallen Angel, I’m sure you have plenty of Sub Legendary-grade items...”

For guild leaders like Plenty and Nie Yan gold was simply a means to an end. What they required more was better equipment to strengthen the players under them.

“I have a decent pair of mage gloves without faction restrictions. Take a look,” Plenty said after a moment of consideration.

A short while later, a subordinate arrived with the gloves.

Akeph's Hand of Knowledge (Sub Legendary)

Description: Akeph was a Great Incantist that sought out the profound, learning every type of magic on the way.

Requirements: 529 Intelligence

Properties: Defense 336–369, Magic Power +32, Intelligence +58, Magic Amplification +10%

Cursing Light: Light magic additionally inflicts the enemy with 3 seconds of confusion and exhaustion. Cooldown: 3 hours.

Life Corrosion: Spells corrode 20% of the enemy's defense and deal additional damage over time based on the player's

Intelligence. Cooldown: 3 hours.

Restrictions: None.

Plenty supplemented Nie Yan with 13,000 gold on top of Akeph's Hand of Knowledge for the Conjuring Skull. Like this, it was a fair trade.

"That about wraps things up. You'll be back in five days?" Plenty asked.

"Yeah." Nie Yan nodded.

Plenty set off to lead the Fallen Angel players in dealing with the Level 60 Variant Lord.

Nie Yan waited for the Dark Portal to come off cooldown in the tavern. He glanced at Empress Finas' Fang in his bag, helpless to bring it out since it was coated in a highly corrosive toxin. He could only examine it from his inventory window.

Empress Finas' Fang (Quest Item): Psychic Object

Description: Converts 30% of the damage from regular attacks into poison damage.

The term Psychic Object was unfamiliar to Nie Yan. However, he could feel a dense aura of darkness radiating from the fang.

Nie Yan was blown away by the description. His regular attacks currently dealt around 1,600 damage. For 30% of that to be converted into poison damage, which ignored all defenses except for poison resistance, was astonishing to say the least. According to his experiences from the previous timeline, attacks with more varied damage compositions generally dealt more damage to bosses. An alteration to the properties of an attack was far more effective than a simple increase in attack power.

Nie Yan checked on the status of his quest.

Quest Progress: Search for Empress Finas' Eye, Psychic Objects (1/3).

It was nowhere close to being finished!

Nie Yan glanced at Bennett's Soul floating beside him. He could only continue searching for the other Psychic Objects some other time.

As the minutes passed, Nie Yan received news that Fallen Angel had taken down Elder Arachne Kasil and obtained a piece of Sub Legendary-grade equipment from his corpse. The drops from a Variant Lord naturally wouldn't be lacking.

It was finally time to leave. Nie Yan left Valitin Village, his silhouette disappearing into the darkness as he dashed east. He found a secluded area and opened up the Dark Portal.

A portal radiating ominous energy appeared before Nie Yan. He stepped forward and disappeared inside.

Just outside of Valitin Village, hundreds of Fallen Angel Players were cleaning up the battlefield. There were corpses strewn about everywhere. Everything within a hundred meter radius was devastated. One could imagine the sort of bitter battle that took place.

"Nirvana Flame returned to the surface?" Plenty asked Proud Warlance who stood beside him.

"I think so." Warlance nodded. Truthfully, when Nie Yan stepped foot outside the village, they already had Thieves on standby to trail him. How he was going to return surface greatly intrigued them. However, they feared it would negatively impact their relationship with him if they were caught, so they dropped the matter in the end. Aside from this, none of the Thieves in Fallen Angel could realistically keep up with him anyway.

"He probably used some sort of teleportation item," Plenty guessed.

"Do you think he can be trusted, that Nirvana Flame?"

"Who knows? In any case, we'll have our answer in five days. A

collaboration would be beneficial to both sides. Assuming he does return, make sure the players you dispatch to meet him are courteous. Remember he holds all the cards in his hand. He can always find other partners to cooperate with,” Plenty reminded. Nie Yan was probably the only player who could currently freely travel between the surface and Underworld.

“I understand.” Warlance nodded. Just a single successful trade would be immensely beneficial to Fallen Angel. But if Nie Yan chose to back out, there was no recourse since the in-game contract system was unavailable to them due to faction restrictions. They could only rely on good faith.

Nie Yan’s pupils sharply contracted as the scenery flashed around him. His vision was shrouded by a vast expanse of bright white.

After who knows how long, Nie Yan opened his eyes to be welcomed by a blue sky and white clouds. His mood immediately improved.

He was finally back in his own world!

Nie Yan checked his coordinates. He was actually in the wilderness surrounding Hilderlocke, the City of Jadeite! He teleported to the city with a Return Scroll, then took a transfer point to Calore.

The streets were even more bustling than before. Nie Yan walked to Asskickers United’s office in Calore.

When the Asskickers United players saw Nie Yan, they rubbed their eyes to make sure they weren’t seeing things.

“Boss, you’ve returned!”

“Hello, Boss!”

The players all excitedly ran up to greet Nie Yan.

The last five days had been some of the roughest in Asskickers United’s short history. The conflict with Bloodlust Blades raged

on, with both sides unwilling to back down. The players of Asskickers United could only patiently endure. Nie Yan's absence during this time was a hard blow to morale. It was as if the guild had lost a supporting pillar. Fortunately, Guo Huai and the other higher-ups didn't neglect their duties. Furthermore, Smoke Stub stepped up to help out where he could since he also had experience with administration. Thanks to this, everything was still running smoothly.

The guild chat immediately exploded in activity when word of Nie Yan's return spread.

「Boss, welcome back!」

「The guild leader is finally back!」

「Welcome home! We missed you so much!」

...

News of Nie Yan's return spread like wildfire. All of Asskickers United celebrated. The previous damp mood was nowhere left to be seen.

Nie Yan was deeply moved. He had spent what felt like a lifetime in the Underworld. He was glad to finally be back. Asskickers United was his home, and the Viridian Empire his sky!

「Where's Watchful Snail. Tell him to get in touch with me,」Nie Yan said in guild chat.

Before long, Guo Huai, Zhao Li, Smoke Stub, and the others all rushed over to the Calore office.

“You're finally back! A day later and we would've packed up our bags and left,” Smoke Stub jested as he patted Nie Yan's chest.

“How are things?” Nie Yan asked. He estimated after so many days the guild's financial situation was akin to a creek during a long drought.

“I'm not the one you should ask.” Smoke Stub forced a smile as

he glanced over at Guo Huai.

“Grim would be the best description. We’re on the verge of collapse. Here’s a report of our financials. Take a look,” Guo Huai said with a helpless expression.

Nie Yan looked over the expenses. They had spent a total of 536,268 gold, of which 360,000 gold was bounty payouts while the rest was compensation for struggling guild members. This was a terrifying figure! Before he left for the Underworld, the guild had just barely 200,000 gold in the bank. They really were running on empty!

“How much gold do we have left?” Nie Yan asked.

“A little over 2,000.” Guo Huai bitterly smiled.

For a guild the size of Asskickers United to only have 2,000 gold in the bank, Nie Yan could imagine how severe things had gotten.

“What about the gold from the Starry Night Potion Shop and other businesses?” Nie Yan asked. He had given Guo Huai permission to withdraw gold from these places.

“I’ve withdrawn as much as I could.” Guo Huai shook his head helplessly. “We’ve received support from our allies, the War God Tribe, Holy Empire, and Sapphire Shrine as well. The Dragonsoar Financial Group has provided us with 170,000 gold in total. Our guild members have also donated 160,000 gold. However, it’s just not enough.

“Our only solace is that Bloodlust Blades aren’t fairing much better. They’ve burned through at least 700,000 gold. Their finances are teetering on the verge of collapse. If it wasn’t for the Century Financial Group, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors helping them out from behind the scenes, they would’ve been finished long ago. I’ve also heard that Angel Corps has thrown themselves in the mix.”

Nie Yan nodded. He roughly understood the situation. Even a

guild that had lost several wars in a row wouldn't easily collapse. Victorious Return was a perfect example. Even though they had suffered so many setbacks, including a huge blow to their prestige, they were still continuing to operate. But an issue with finances was another matter altogether. All guild activity required expenses, not to mention members would require compensation for any damages they incurred. If something as basic as compensation couldn't even be provided, who would be willing to stay!? It would be a wonder if a guild like this didn't collapse! Both Asskickers United and Bloodlust Blades were currently on the edge of a deep abyss.

Chapter 355 – Offloading

Asskickers United had spent all gold available to them. The guild treasury was completely empty. The guild members also suffered disastrous losses. They were hunted down by other players every time they stepped foot out of the city. What little gold they did manage to earn would be eaten up by the cost of recovering from their losses. They couldn't even get any levelling done.

This was simply too much of an ordeal. Some players could no longer endure and withdrew from the guild. Even though they were willing to become members, they had no real attachments to the guild. They were far from optimistic about coming out on top in this conflict against Bloodlust Blades, feeling Asskickers United would be the first to fall. Such occurrences were common in intense wars of attrition. Roughly 6,000 players had left the guild, with only 60,000 remaining. However, that number was still dropping.

“Let them leave if they want. We can't rely on such players to grow the guild. We'll just recruit new people later on. This is an opportunity to weed out the coattail riders. The members staying behind are the ones who truly make up the heart of the guild, so make sure to reward them properly after all this is over,” Nie Yan said after Guo Huai briefed him on the situation.

“The problem is, how are we going to get through this crisis? Our guild treasury is empty. We're basically running on fumes,” Guo Huai said with an anxious look. The situation had developed far beyond his expectations. Asskickers United and Bloodlust Blades had become the targets of everyone. However, there was nothing that could be done. It was their own fault for putting up such lucrative bounties! The number of players participating was constantly increasing, meaning more and more gold had to be spent every day paying out rewards and compensating losses.

Guo Huai initially thought they could hold out for at least 10

days. Who could have known they would be on the verge of collapse before even five days! After managing the guild for so long, he had deep attachments to it, even using his own personal funds to purchase gold so he could support the guild. He really didn't want to see the guild he painstakingly built from the ground up fall in such a way.

Nie Yan chuckled. "Leave it to me. For now, take this 50,000 gold to tide us over."

"50,000 gold isn't enough." Guo Huai shook his head. "It'll probably keep us afloat for the afternoon, and even that's uncertain..." He was all too familiar with how fast their gold was draining away.

"Don't worry, I also brought a lot of equipment with me back from the Underworld," Nie Yan said with a confident smile. His bags were all filled to the brim. To borrow the words of Plenty, they would certainly earn a staggering amount from selling everything he had smuggled back.

"I see, that's good. Let's cope as best as we can." Judging from his confident appearance, Guo Huai believed Nie Yan had secured around 100,000 gold's worth of equipment, which would last them a day or two.

Bloodlust Blades was also suffering. It was possible this 100,000 gold was just what Asskickers United needed to come out on top in this war.

Never in his wildest dreams could Guo Huai have imagined that Nie Yan hadn't secured 100,000 gold's worth of equipment but rather 1,000,000!

Guo Huai couldn't be blamed for his faulty conjecture. Even in the best case scenario, Nie Yan could have only secured 100,000 gold's worth of equipment working by himself in the Underworld. However, thanks to the assistance of Plenty and all of Fallen Angel, he had come back with five bags full of top quality equipment!

While Nie Yan and Guo Huai chatted, Bladelight, Undying Scoundrel, Summer Bug, and the rest of the gang arrived as well. They showed excited expressions when they saw Nie Yan.

“Boss! When we heard you returned, we rushed back to see you!”

Seeing this familiar group of faces, Nie Yan’s lips parted into a warm smile. He noticed Undying Scoundrel was only wearing Level 40 equipment. His level was only 43.

Nie Yan patted Undying Scoundrel’s shoulders with a faint smile. “How did you end up in such a miserable state?”

“I was ambushed and surrounded while levelling outside. I lost all my equipment and dropped a few levels. I still haven’t gotten the chance to recover,” Undying Scoundrel replied with an awkward chuckle.

Nie Yan’s expression slightly trembled. Since the guild treasury was empty, it was impossible for Undying Scoundrel to recover from such a setback. Without decent equipment, levelling up became much harder. Given he had dropped down to Level 43, it appeared he dropped quite a few levels after dying.

“Boss, ignore him. Who told him to be so reckless? When he got surrounded, he started going on a player killing rampage instead of running away. It would be strange if he didn’t die,” Summer Bug interjected.

It wasn’t just Undying Scoundrel. Nie Yan noticed lower-quality equipment here and there on all of them. Their levels had also stagnated. It was only Tang Yao who appeared relatively unaffected. Thanks to recently acquiring a few special items, he started levelling by himself in high level maps, where few players could follow.

“Boss, now that you’re back we can rest easy. Bloodlust Blades is losing guild members even faster than us every day. I refuse to believe they’ll outlast us!” Undying Scoundrel said optimistically.

Nie Yan was moved as he looked at this group of players. He had reviewed the guild logs. Since the guild couldn't compensate them according to the terms of their contract, many contracted members had left. The ones who still remained behind despite these hardships were the most faithful brothers of the guild! Their loyalty was without question!

Nie Yan showed a bright smile. "You guys can put your worries to rest. Our lack of funds will be resolved soon enough. Asskickers United will always stand strong. We'll never lose! No matter how rich Bloodlust Blades is, they'll still fall before us!"

"Boss, we believe in you!"

Everyone had complete faith in Nie Yan. He definitely had a way to resolve this issue; otherwise, he wouldn't have spoken with such confidence. The worry in their hearts vanished like a puff of smoke. Even though they were loyal to Asskickers United, they couldn't help but feel nervous deep down. The past few days had been some of the most trying for the guild. Even their group was worried the guild would collapse, to say nothing of the lower ranking members!

Nie Yan gazed at Smoke Stub who smiled back at him. It was clear he was determined to stick with Asskickers United through thick and thin. Any further words would simply be superfluous.

Sometimes words weren't required to communicate.

"Guo Huai, Smoke Stub, go sort through the guild's records and calculate how much each player has lost," Nie Yan ordered.

"Alright!" Guo Huai nodded.

Nie Yan turned to Undying Scoundrel and the others. "You guys should go off levelling. I'll call for you guys if I need you."

When everyone departed, Nie Yan also got to work. He bought a large cloak to prevent himself from being recognized, then prepared to head to various large auction houses to offload the

equipment he acquired in the Underworld. He first visited the Calore Central Auction House and listed three pieces of equipment with Night Vision +10 or higher up for auction, setting the starting bid for each of them to around 2,000 gold.

Equipment with Night Vision +10 or higher was considered high-end. The number of players who could afford them weren't many, but they absolutely weren't few either. It was fairly normal for wealthy players to have upwards of 20,000 gold. Some of them were whales who frequently spent exorbitant amounts of real world cash to purchase in-game gold. A subset of them were experts. If something caught their eye, especially if it was rare, they naturally wouldn't hesitate to buy.

Beyond this, many players had profited immensely off the conflict between Asskickers United and Bloodlust Blades, with some earning upwards of 30,000 gold. They would naturally use these recently obtained funds to upgrade their gear, and equipment that increased Night Vision was some of the most useful!

Nie Yan's actions immediately stirred up waves, inciting players into an unprecedented bidding war. Pieces of equipment with Night Vision +10 or higher were basically never seen. Ones that increased Night Vision at all were already considered quite good.

Players generally only swapped out their regular equipment for Night Vision equipment when they had to enter dark environments like caves. Even though this increased their chances of survival, there was usually a trade-off in other stats. A piece of equipment with Night Vision +10 would greatly mitigate this issue!

It wasn't every day three pieces of equipment with Night Vision +10 or higher appeared in the marketplace, so the players naturally lost their minds.

The bids on the three pieces of equipment started rapidly climbing, increasing by increments of at least 5 gold every time.

Many players were flooding into the Central Auction House. All of them were there for the Night Vision equipment.

“I heard some equipment with Night Vision +10 popped up in the Central Auction House.”

“Night Vision +10? I wonder where you can find equipment like that.”

...

News of the Night Vision equipment spread like a wildfire in the streets. Nie Yan never imagined word would get around so fast.

The Central Auction House was crowded even more than usual with players. The first piece of equipment with Night Vision +11 sold for over 3,000 gold after there'd been no new bidder for five minutes. The two other pieces of equipment with Night Vision +10 sold for 2,300 gold and 2,200 gold respectively.

When the three pieces of Night Vision equipment were sold, everyone became a bit downtrodden. As they were about to leave, another three pieces were listed up for auction, immediately causing an uproar. Just when did equipment with Night Vision +10 or higher become as common as cabbage?

“Fuck, who's the person behind this? Why did so much Night Vision equipment suddenly appear?”

Everyone looked around, but the auction house was a sea of players. Who could find anyone in such a densely packed crowd?

The mad scramble was far from over. There were still many people who needed Night Vision equipment. Although the competition was still fierce, the rate at which the bids increased slowed down noticeably. They were worried the person selling the Night Vision equipment was sitting on a large stockpile. If they were patient, maybe they could snag a piece for cheap.

Nie Yan stood up and walked out of the Central Auction House. Staying any longer would only lead to less profit. Even when

offloading equipment, it was important to pay attention to strategy.

Chapter 356 – Windfall

A while later, Nie Yan arrived at the Calore Mercenary Auction House. He listed up several pieces of Night Vision and Focus increasing equipment, immediately inciting a mad scramble among the players present. It wasn't every day such highly sought after equipment appeared in the marketplace, so how could they let this opportunity slip by?

All of Calore's attention was suddenly focused on these pieces of equipment. The competition was fierce, the prices rocketing sky high.

Nie Yan visited every large auction house in Calore, selling over 20 pieces of equipment in total. Afterwards, he made his way to the auction houses in other cities, such as Hilderlocke, Glory City, and so on. The appearance of Night Vision equipment stirred up huge waves in these places.

Thanks to perks of the Grand Scholar title, Nie Yan freely travelled to the 30 plus cities across the Viridian Empire, selling more than 100 pieces of equipment in total. Although this seemed like a lot, it was a mere drop in the ocean compared to the deluge of items that circulated through the empire every day.

The equipment Nie Yan listed up sparked fierce competition in every city. The bids increased less frequently in the smaller cities, but in some of the larger ones the equipment would sell for a premium.

This lively spectacle persisted as the items were sold throughout the empire. Nie Yan checked his trade logs.

Your Disintegrator Gloves have been successfully auctioned off for 2,820 gold!

Your Light Source Cuisses have been successfully auctioned off for 2,305 gold!

...

One notification after the other popped up in Nie Yan's trade logs while gold poured into his personal storage by the thousands. His balance rose up from 50,000 gold to 100,000 gold, 200,000 gold, and finally 360,000 gold.

As the last item auctioned off, the first round of offloading was over. Nie Yan checked his bag, which still contained roughly 180 pieces of equipment. He had saved the best for last, planning to get rid of them later when the players were hungry for more.

When the six pieces of Night Vision equipment were auctioned off, the bidding frenzy in the Calore Central Auction House finally calmed down. However, the crowd didn't disperse; they were waiting for Nie Yan to continue listing up more items. Only after a long time with nothing happening did they realize that the ship had already sailed. Those who failed to get anything were endlessly vexed, cursing themselves for not taking action sooner.

"I guess it's over. Let's leave."

"Dammit! If I knew this would happen, I wouldn't have held back. I thought that guy was going to continue dumping equipment. I was too hopeful."

"This world has no potion for regret. So be it. Get someone to keep watch over the auction house. Who knows if he'll be back with more."

Only now did the crowd in the Central Auction House finally disperse.

Nie Yan glanced at the 360,000 gold in his personal storage. He could do many things with this gold, at the very least restore the gear quality of Asskickers United back to its previous state prior to the war with Bloodlust Blades.

「Guo Huai, you finished with the calculations? How much gold do we need to spend?」Nie Yan asked. He wanted to fully

compensate every member in Asskickers United for all the losses they suffered. He planned to reward them for their loyalty in the future as well.

“At least 120,000 gold, which averages to about roughly 2 gold per player. A lot of our guild members have suffered setbacks due to the loss of their gear, with their average level dropping by at least three, so we’ll need to compensate them for that as well,” Guo Huai replied. He knew they owed quite a bit in restitution, but with their current finances being so tight, this matter could only be put off for the time being.

「Including the loss of equipment and levels, how much does it come out to?」Nie Yan asked.

「I suppose around 200,000 gold,」Guo Huai replied.

「Alright, I’ll give you 200,000 gold. Start handing out the restitution, and make sure you don’t miss anyone!」Nie Yan ordered. The players who had stuck with Asskickers United until now were absolutely the most loyal members of the guild! Stiffing any of them was unacceptable!

「What...? Just where did you get 200,000 gold from?」Guo Huai asked in sheer disbelief.

「I just sold some of the equipment I got from the Underworld and netted about 360,000 gold. I still have quite a bit left to sell,」Nie Yan replied with a faint chuckle. He had tested out the waters with the first round of offloading, and the market had responded well. He was confident he could sell the remaining equipment for an even greater profit!

「Really, that much!? How much do you think you’ll earn selling all the equipment?」Guo Huai couldn’t help but ask in a trembling voice. With 360,000 gold, they could take down Bloodlust Blades. He refused to believe they could last much longer! Perhaps even more shocking was that Nie Yan claimed to still have a lot left to sell!

「I'd, say around 1,000,000 gold,」Nie Yan replied. His real estimation was closer to 1,200,000 gold, but he didn't dare to make any guarantees.

“You're not pulling my leg, right?” Guo Huai felt his head spinning. Just what kind of sum was 1,000,000 gold? Asskickers United had been pushed to the verge of bankruptcy after only spending 60% of that amount! With this gold, he was confident they could fully recover from this war and come back even stronger! They would become the richest guild, especially with Bloodlust Blades out of the picture!

「Quickly come over so I can give you the 200,000 gold. Also bring along some trustworthy people, preferably those you know in real life. I want to rebuild the guild treasury!」Nie Yan boldly declared. The current guild treasury of Asskickers United looked quite unsightly, with only a thousand items scattered here and there. Rebuilding it was their top priority!

「I'll be there right away!」Guo Huai said, barely containing his excitement. He immediately got to work.

Before long, Guo Huai arrived with more than 100 players in tow. He took the 200,000 gold back with him to the guild headquarters and started paying out restitution. Meanwhile, Nie Yan brought the 100 players with him as he visited various large auction houses, purchasing suitably priced equipment which would then be delivered to the guild treasury. He didn't feel at ease leaving the job to others, so he wanted to personally handle it himself. The estimated cost of restoring the guild treasury to its previous state was at least 200,000 gold. However, there was no harm in getting started.

When word got around that Guo Huai was paying out restitution, the players voiced their bewilderment in the guild chat. Wasn't the guild on the verge of bankruptcy? Where did this gold come from?

「Executive Guild Leader, you're not playing a joke, are you?」one

player asked.

「Watchful Snail, forget it. We understand finances are tight right now. Let's wait for the storm to pass over first. When everyone is suffering like this, how could we have the face to take the guild's gold?」

This opinion was echoed by many others in the chat.

「Enough with the nonsense. You don't think I know that? Hurry up and take the gold before I start embezzling it,」Guo Huai jokingly scolded.「The guild isn't lacking funds anymore. We're going to compensate everyone for all the losses they suffered. Those of you that donated to help keep things afloat will be rewarded doubly. We won't mistreat any of the members who chose to stick with us.」

The guild wasn't lacking funds anymore? Just where did this gold come from? The players were flabbergasted and started bombarding Guo Huai with questions.

「Nirvana Flame recently managed to secure some funds. Don't worry. If the guild's finances were truly tight, we wouldn't hesitate to do what's needed,」Guo Huai assured. His words immediately dispelled their doubts, giving them renewed confidence. In that case, didn't this mean Asskickers United would win the war?

A few astute players did the calculations. The cost of compensating every single member in the guild would total at least 150,000 gold! For the guild to take out so much gold, they sure were rich!

The restless players who feared the collapse of Asskickers United immediately had their minds put at ease.

The guild members hurriedly flocked to the guild headquarters in United City. Everyone received at least 1 gold in restitution. Those who had suffered large losses received 5 or 6 gold to upwards of 50

gold. The stronghold was bustling with activity.

Aside from paying out restitution, Guo Huai under Nie Yan's orders started distributing medals to the guild members. The medals were divided into bronze, silver, gold, and dark gold. They represented a member's status in the guild. Every player who had stuck with the guild through this ordeal would at least receive a bronze medal, which signified their status as veteran members who were willing to risk life and limb for the guild. The silver medal was given to members who had made outstanding contributions to the guild during the war with Bloodlust Blades, such as donating vast sums of gold. Gold medals represented the most important members of the guild. There were many players with bronze and silver medals, but those who received a gold medal numbered only around several dozen.

When Asskickers United recruited new players in the future, these veteran members would be treated much better than the new recruits. Otherwise, if any new recruit could receive the same treatment as them, they would start feeling resentment.

This initiative by Nie Yan received all round approval. These players had stuck with the guild during its most trying times, never leaving. Compared to receiving compensation, they were much happier about earning the recognition of the guild. These medals were their glory which proved they had gone through the many trials and hardships together with the guild!

When everyone was receiving compensation in the stronghold, some keen-eyed players noticed the guild treasury rapidly filling up with several hundred items at a time. These items weren't just trash meant to fill up space either. All of them were useful with decent properties.

First was the 200,000 gold in compensation, then the guild treasury filling up with over 100,000 gold's worth of items right after. Nie Yan's show of wealth shocked everyone, causing them to confirm one thing in their minds. Bloodlust Blades had kicked a

steel plate. Asskickers United's victory was right around the corner!

Chapter 357 - Death Wave Scroll

Deep within Red River Stronghold, the upper echelon of Bloodlust Blades led by Mad Blade anxiously discussed the issue of gold. At the start of the war, they felt assured of their victory. After all, they had ample capital after receiving over 500,000 gold from the Century Financial Group. This was why they dared to declare war against Asskickers United. No one had attempted something so audacious as putting up a bounty on a whole guild before.

A few thousand gold was generally the upper limit for a bounty on a single player. However, there was no such thing for a guild. Even so, Mad Blade was confident since he had almost 1,000,000 gold at his disposal. He refused to believe Asskickers United could match such a terrifying sum, even with the support of the Dragonsoar Financial Group. When it came to amassing gold, no one could compare to the Century Financial Group. The virtual reality industry was their bread and butter!

Calore was the domain of Asskickers United. Bloodlust Blades couldn't do anything to them on their home turf. Just the same, Asskickers United wouldn't throw caution to the wind and besiege Glory City. However, war by proxy was a viable alternative.

Mad Blade had first provoked Asskickers United on the forums, sealing off all paths of retreat for both sides. He believed Bloodlust Blades could easily outlast Asskickers United. However, he never expected them to show such resilience, lasting for so long. He believed victory was guaranteed, but his understanding of the overall situation was too shallow. He could never imagine Nie Yan owned the Starry Night Potion Shop, let alone numerous plots of lands, shops, and auction houses, which generated a wealth of gold for Asskickers United every day.

With every day Asskickers United still stood strong, Mad Blade started to feel increasingly anxious. Bloodlust Blades was

struggling to make ends meet. Even though the Century Financial Group was sending over gold on a daily base, it was like trying to put out a house fire with a cup of water. Mad Blade was forced to sell a portion of the equipment in the guild treasury, earning them enough funds to hang on for another day or two. However, this move quickly incited the discontent of the guild members since it was tantamount to cutting their benefits. Add this to the fact that they were being hunted down like dogs in the wilderness, leaving them unable to level in peace, many of them believed this war with Asskickers United was a mistake and left the guild. It appeared Bloodlust Blades wasn't having it easy either.

“Boss, I just received some news. Asskickers United obtained hundreds of thousands of gold from who knows where. They're providing compensation to all their players and starting to rebuild their guild treasury,” an Elementalist informed Mad Blade.

“Hundreds of thousands? Just where did they get so much gold from? Are you sure?” Bloodlust Blades asked in utter disbelief. It was too strange. This was like something straight out of a story book. How did Asskickers United suddenly obtain enough gold to not only compensate their players but also rebuild their guild treasury?

“It's the truth. I had someone investigate. Asskickers United has obtained at least 300,000 gold,” the Elementalist replied.

Mad Blade's eyebrows started twitching erratically. 300,000 gold was no small sum. Since Asskickers United was willing to take out this much for their guild members, didn't this signify they still had more gold sitting in the bank?

“Was it the Dragonsoar Financial Group?”

“Absolutely not. The Dragonsoar Financial Group's gold farmers are being constantly monitored by the Century Financial Group. There's no way they could take out that much gold.”

“Then where did it come from?” Mad Blade asked in

bewilderment.

“Boss, are you aware of the Night Vision equipment that’s been popping up in auction houses lately?” a Fighter interjected.

“Yes, it’s a pity our finances are so tight; otherwise, we would’ve bought one or two pieces,” Mad Blade replied. He was at least up to date on this much.

“I’ve heard they appeared in every city across the Viridian Empire. Whoever’s behind this is a high roller. They’ve earned at least a couple hundred thousand gold selling all that Night Vision equipment,” the Fighter said.

Mad Blade understood what the Fighter was getting at. Could Nie Yan be the person behind the sudden emergence of Night Vision equipment? After thinking it over, it was the only logical explanation. How else could Asskickers United obtain so much gold?

“We don’t know how much Night Vision equipment he still has left. I estimate the current market will have no problem gobbling up 500 to 600 pieces. That’s an estimate worth of 3 to 4 million gold.”

The Fighter’s words were a bit sensationalist. However, Mad Blade understood this 3 to 4 million was absolutely the most conservative estimation. If Asskickers United really obtained so much gold, Bloodlust Blades might just as well surrender right now. However, he recalled the words he put on the forums. Whoever backed out first was the other’s grandson!

Mad Blade’s expression turned gloomy. “Send word to the people over at the Century Financial Group. We need more gold. If Bloodlust Blades falls, they’ll take a hit too!”

“Boss, they won’t like to hear that,” warned the Elementalist, who remained relatively coolheaded.

Only then did Mad Blade calm down. He knew they couldn’t

afford to irritate the Century Financial Group. Helplessly waving his hand, he ordered, “Go. Discuss it over with them. See if they can provide us with more funds or some other method to deal with Asskickers United. If things continue on like this, we won’t last for much longer.”

Mad Blade’s mind was a mess. He couldn’t help but feel that Nirvana Flame would be the death of him someday.

The situation had progressed in a way where Asskickers United had seized the initiative. Their guild treasury had more than 100,000 gold, which was enough to last them for another day. They would be fine as long as Nie Yan sold the remaining items he brought back from the Underworld within the next five days.

Gold was no longer an issue, so Nie Yan wasn’t worried. He predicted Bloodlust Blades would collapse any time now. The resources Bloodlust Blades spent was the Century Financial Group’s, meaning he was also shaving away the Century Financial Group's strength.

Nie Yan was perfectly content with going at it with the Century Financial Group like this. He could freely travel back and forth between the surface and the Underworld. When the market in the Viridian Empire was saturated with Night Vision equipment, he could simply switch over to selling equipment that increased other properties such as Focus. In any case, there were a million other things he could smuggle. This was one of the perks of working with a large guild like Fallen Angel. They could easily amass almost any type of item. If he had to do such work all by himself, it would be incredibly challenging.

With this source of income, Nie Yan could just watch the gold roll in. No matter how wealthy the Century Financial Group was, there was no way they could compete.

Aside from shaving away at the Century Financial Group, Nie Yan also planned to use the remaining gold to upgrade the

equipment of his players or help them power-level.

It was important that the levels of the players in Asskickers United didn't stagnate. As the opponent got weaker, they would grow stronger!

When money wasn't a problem, many things could be easily resolved. In the previous timeline, the Century Financial Group had used their wealth to dominate the Viridian Empire, sweeping over all competition with the five major guilds under their control. In this life, Nie Yan wished to duplicate their success for his own benefit!

Nie Yan had starting laying out the foundation of his grand vision by acquiring both Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine as well as investing in the War God Tribe. Furthermore, he had held initial talks with Battle Crazy Alliance and Radiant Sacred Flame, who both expressed interest in an alliance. However, all negotiations were halted when Bloodlust Blades declared war. Battle Crazy Alliance and Radiant Sacred Flame were watching from the sidelines. If Asskickers United was defeated, all his hard work would go up in smoke!

Nie Yan planned to amass a large amount of wealth, enough to acquire both Battle Crazy Alliance and Radiant Sacred Flame. This way, his alliance would comprise six major guilds. If he supported them with investments and allowed them to grow unimpeded, there would be no place left for Victorious Return in Calore. After this war was over, Bloodlust Blades' strength would also drop by half. As for Alliance of Mages and Divine Protectors, although they were strong they couldn't compare to Asskickers United, Holy Empire, Sapphire Shrine, War God Tribe, Radiant Sacred Flame, and Battle Crazy Alliance in terms of growth potential. It was because these six guilds were situated in the top three most populated cities in the Viridian Empire. Surpassing Alliances of Mages and Divine Protectors was only a matter of time.

Nie Yan's ultimate end goal was to create an invincible powerhouse by unifying the entire Viridian Empire! He already had a roadmap in his head. All he had to do was carry it out!

Nie Yan buried these thoughts deep in his heart. He wouldn't reveal them until the day he achieved his aim.

Asskickers United had another source of gold. After the guild treasury was replenished, the guild members all started exchanging for new equipment. After going through a long period of hardship, everything was right back on track.

Everyone was surprised. Asskickers United was like a phoenix rising from the ashes, reinvigorated with new life.

The shocking news that Asskickers United had begun refilling their treasury and compensating its members spread like wildfire. Where had the guild gotten all that money from? Many people saw this as a sign: Bloodlust Blades would fall while Asskickers United stood tall. Some professional players who had hunted Asskickers United's players even left Calore, moving to Glory City to earn their fortune there. Such was the world. The strong reigned over the weak. Many bounty hunters targeted Asskickers United when Bloodlust Blades put on an aggressive front, but now that Asskickers United seemed to have the upper hand, they knew better than to stick around and continue poking this massive bear.

It was as if a heavy rock had been lifted from the shoulders of the players from Asskickers United. However, the same couldn't be said for the players from Bloodlust Blades.

Nie Yan deposited the Evil Faction equipment into his personal storage, then went to restock on consumables. He checked his Soul Pendant which had all 50 slots filled with Death Wave Scrolls. Each stack contained 20 scrolls for a total of 1,000 scrolls. He wondered how many levels he would gain by using up all of them!

Chapter 358 - Legend of the Assassin

Nie Yan was just about to set off when Guo Huai brought him some exciting news! Five players in the guild had successfully class advanced: Sun, Smoke Stub, Sunny South, Summer Bug, and Lustboy.

Sun had become a Great Tempest Thief, Smoke Stub a Great Berserker, Sunny South a Great Holy Mage, and Summer Bug a Great Arcanist.

The four of them were within his expectations. However, he didn't recognise the name Lustboy, nor had he ever heard of it in his past life. This player seemed to have popped out of nowhere!

「Who's Lustboy?」Nie Yan asked. Given how large Asskickers United was, for one or two players to suddenly shoot up in the ranks was nothing out of the ordinary.

「I'm not too sure either. Bladelight's group brought him with them on their recent dungeon runs and gave him a few pointers. Who knew he would be such a quick study? He's even better than some veteran members,」Guo Huai replied. Asskickers United encouraged the older members to guide newer recruits. Only like this could the guild grow stronger as a whole.

This was also a butterfly effect produced by Nie Yan. Bladelight, Smoke Stub, Young Seven... in his past life, these experts were seldom ever in the same place, and no one could ever imagine the results of them working together. Their rate of advancement was much faster than their previous timeline counterparts. Any casual piece of advice they gave out was of immense value to the ordinary members of the guild.

Players unfamiliar to Nie Yan in his past life like Paladin of the Elegy and Tyrannical were starting to garner attention in recent times. Among them Lustboy was the most remarkable. They were nameless in the previous timeline. But after Asskickers United

provided them a suitable platform to grow, they were quickly blossoming into dazzling figures! Paladin of the Elegy, Tyrannical, and more were also tackling the barrier of the first class advancement!

Right now, Asskickers United was a nebula of shining stars! Especially the brightest ones like Lustboy left Nie Yan feeling gratified.

「Is Lustboy contracted to the guild?」Nie Yan asked. As long as a player showed potential, he wouldn't hesitate to offer them a generous contract.

「We still don't have the funds for that. We're currently in the middle of negotiations. However, Lustboy has already agreed to sign, saying he wouldn't have gotten to where he is today without the guild giving him a place to grow or the guidance of Smoke Stub and Bladelight. He didn't seem to particularly care about the terms of the contract, but I plan to give him the best treatment. I just wanted to get your opinion first.」

「Go ahead. You have my approval. Also, make an announcement saying the guild won't hesitate to give those who show potential the best treatment!」Nie Yan said. In any case, gold was no longer an issue. The guild members would see a rise in their benefits, especially those who contributed greatly to the guild; they were the pillars of the guild. He couldn't allow them to feel like they were losing out by staying.

If it wasn't for the recent war with Bloodlust Blades, Asskickers United would've already had more than a hundred Adept Class players. Thankfully, the guild's foundation was still intact. When the situation calmed down, the number of players class advancing would quickly rise.

Nie Yan chatted with Guo Huai for a bit longer before hanging up.

Nie Yan glanced at his character bar. He was only Level 40. It was

pathetically low given his status as the guild leader of Asskickers United. Reaching Level 50 and class advancing to a Great Thief was priority number one. He racked his brain for a suitable levelling spot.

The Death Wave Scroll was one of the few magical items that dealt fixed damage regardless of resistances and defense, but it was only effective on living creatures. Nie Yan had to find relatively low health monsters that gave ample experience. It was also best if they were slow, so he had sufficient time to activate the scrolls.

Nie Yan departed from Calore and found a secluded place, where he summoned the Faulkner Warhorse and galloped away into the wilderness.

Nie Yan just happened to encounter a group of a hundred players on their way to a high-level map in his path. Based on their numbers, they were probably going to hunt a Lord-class monster. Most of them were solo players, but he saw various guild emblems scattered among them.

Nie Yan recalled participating in these sorts of expeditions in his past life. They were usually organized by one or two individuals who kept the drops from killing the Lord. However, they would compensate the players that took part with gold or credits.

These sorts of expedition teams were quite common. Back when Nie Yan was broke and penniless, he frequently joined them to make some quick cash. If the organizer was a high roller, he could earn up to 600 credits in a single expedition, which was enough to last him for a while.

Nie Yan started reminiscing after seeing this group of players. However, he quickly snapped back to reality. There was no point in sulking over the past events of a different world. He sped away on his Faulkner Warhorse.

Seeing Nie Yan's silhouette, a commotion broke out among this group of players.

“That’s Nirvana Flame! I’ve watched so many of his videos, there’s no way I’d mistake him! That mount he’s riding... isn’t that a Faulkner Warhorse!?”

“Should we chase after him? I heard Bloodlust Blades put up an 8,000 gold bounty on him, not to mention any piece of equipment that drops from him is guaranteed to be worth at least several thousand gold.”

“We could earn at least 10,000 gold by killing him!”

“We definitely stand a good chance. Just look at our numbers. How about we give it a shot?”

“Going after Nirvana Flame? Were you people dropped on the head as kids? Let’s set aside how we’d be hunted down like dogs by Asskickers United for now. Several thousand of the top players in Bloodlust Blades couldn’t even catch him. Do you really believe our little group will be enough?”

The several players who suggested going after Nie Yan immediately lowered their heads in shame and shut their mouths. They were so blinded by greed that they had forgotten their target was an existence that couldn’t be provoked. Killing ordinary members was fine. After all, practically every expert in Calore had dabbled in this feud. It was impossible for Asskickers United to retaliate against everyone. But anyone who attempted to go after their guild leader shouldn’t even think about setting foot anywhere near Calore again. Although they were powerless to stop the masses, dealing with a handful of players was a fairly simple matter.

When the players looked back, Nie Yan had disappeared into the horizon.

Nie Yan continued galloping south, passing through a vast stretch of prairie. He had spent a total of 20 minutes. It would’ve taken an ordinary player more than an hour and a half to cover the same distance.

Nie Yan passed through a Level 50 map, a Level 60 map, and even a Level 70 map. However, he showed no signs of stopping. He passed by numerous different giant monsters as the scenery blurred past him.

During this time, Nie Yan checked his quest log. He still had to do the quest related to the Tyrant Abak Set. This quest had a 10 day time limit. He had received it just before his trip to the Underworld, so he had about 5 days left to finish it.

Nie Yan knew he would trigger a major questline by meeting Earl Kelfide, so it was best if he raised his level first.

Nie Yan also took a look at the Union of Assassins. A staggering 250,000 gold had been paid out for the bounty he put on Bloodlust Blades. They had killed a total of 128,382 players.

This was a terrifying figure, especially given that Bloodlust Blades only had around 360,000 players in total.

Nie Yan glanced at the top participants.

Rank 1: King of the World

Kill Count: 1,328

Rank 2: Hapless Frog

Kill Count: 1,021

...

There were also 60 others with kill counts ranging from 700 to 800.

Nie Yan wasn't surprised the top two participants were Thieves. After all, the class was most suited for assassination.

King of the World... [1] Nie Yan suddenly recalled such a person in his past life. He was rumoured to be a former soldier. No one knew for sure, but he was undoubtedly a famous Thief. He guild hopped from Dark Hero to Holy Empire and then finally Victorious Return, where during that time his reputation surpassed even that

of Sun and Shadow. Later on, he had a falling out with them and left the guild. Victorious Return didn't respond to this well and placed a bounty on his head. However, he was unfazed, killing anyone who came after him by relying on his remarkable assassination skills. Over the course of this event, he racked up a headcount of more than 1,000 players, causing Victorious Return to lose a great deal of face. For whatever reason, all news of him disappeared after that.

It was rumoured King of the World was betrayed, his identity in real life leaked to Heaven Breaker, who then sent foreign hitmen after his life. Several of his close brothers ended up dying during the attempt, with only him escaping.

However, things didn't end just there. Later on, Heaven Breaker and a person nicknamed Night Cat were found dead in their villas. There were no signs of damage on their bodies except for a bloody hole in their necks, which were determined to be puncture wounds created by a sharp object, presumably a dagger. The murderer was thought to have had special assassination training of some sort. When the authorities went to review the satellite data, they discovered it had been hacked, with the surveillance video of everything near the two murder scenes being wiped clean. The culprit was never found. Many people had a good idea of who was behind these two murders. But no one had proof. From then on, control of Victorious Return was handed over to Heaven Breaker's son, and King of the World never appeared again.

This was one of the most contentious and sensational developments that had occurred since the release of Conviction. So of course the media had reported on it extensively.

Heaven Breaker and Cao Xu were in the same boat, so Nie Yan had naturally paid close attention to this news. After the disappearance of King of the World, many players felt great sorrow at the loss of this legendary Thief who stood side by side with figures like Sun and Shadow Killer. If King of the World hadn't

shown up in the Union of Assassins, Nie Yan would've completely forgotten about him.

[1] King of the World was first introduced in Chapter 334. He considers Nie Yan half his master. He set off to Glory City to hunt the players of Bloodlust Blades to help his close friends earn gold.

Chapter 359 - Power-Levelling With Death Wave Scrolls

A legend would always be a legend no matter the circumstances. Just like how a piece of gold would always shine, nothing could contain their brilliance!

Take Sun, for example, his reputation among Thieves soared after successfully advancing into a Great Thief. He was hot on Nie Yan's heels. King of the World slaughtering over a thousand players from Bloodlust Blades also garnered a great deal of attention, and his radiance was starting to blossom.

Nie Yan contacted Guo Huai straight away to recruit King of the World and accept all his conditions so long as they weren't too excessive.

With the addition of King of World, Asskickers United would have another Shadow Dancer added to the roster, which comprised Nie Yan, Sun, and One Strike Vow. Add this to the dozen other players who showed potential of becoming Shadow Dancers, and Asskickers United was turning into a holy land for Thieves.

The Thief was a heavily skill reliant class which clumsy players would find difficult to play. Many Thieves held skill in far higher regard than players of other classes, frequently scouring through videos of top-ranking Thieves on the forums. Any half-decent Thief would yearn for the opportunity to receive personal guidance from any one such figure. This was why existences like Nie Yan and Sun would inevitably attract the most talented Thieves to Asskickers United.

Of course this didn't merely apply to Thieves but other classes too. If it wasn't for the war with Bloodlust Blades, Asskickers United would have even more experts in their ranks. However, the recent raise in player benefits did aid in renewing confidence in the guild. Those who previously left couldn't help but feel a tinge of

regret. Many didn't have the face to return. Others were begging to be taken back. However, their loyalty couldn't help but be put into doubt.

Guo Huai immediately set to task after receiving Nie Yan's order.

Nie Yan also gave Bird a call and instructed him on the next steps of development for the Starry Night Potion Shop. It had already become a household name, so slowly expanding out absolutely wasn't a problem. Furthermore, thanks to the Grand Scholar title, his properties received the protection of the Viridian Empire. Even if he opened up a branch in the heart of Glory City, there was nothing Bloodlust Blades could do about it.

The surroundings gradually transformed into a muddy marshland as Nie Yan continued galloping on his Faulkner Warhorse. It wasn't long before he encountered monsters, fairies roughly the size of a child with pale green skin. They slowly fluttered around with wings on their backs, wielding three-pronged spears in their hands.

The marshland was filled with this particular type of creature.

They were a hybrid between goblin and fae with violent natures. Their hostility toward humans led to them being classified as monsters. Their attacks were powerful, over several times that of ordinary monsters. They could probably kill Nie Yan in a single hit. However, they only had a little over 5,000 health, which was rare among Level 80 monsters. Their Awareness was also low, so a Thief in stealth could easily escape from them. Lastly, they were slow.

Nie Yan carefully approached one of them from behind and activated Transcendent Insight.

Faelin: Level 80

Health: 5,200/5,200

Nie Yan took out his Cavalry Crossbow and fired out five bolts at

the Faelin, which let out a sharp howl and alerted the other Faelin to his presence. He immediately had an angry swarm of Faelin descend on him from all around.

Nie Yan turned tail and fled. He fired his Cavalry Crossbow every time he came across a group of Faelin, who came rushing after him one after another.

The mass of mobs behind Nie Yan quickly grew to an astonishing size.

Nie Yan glanced back at the hundreds of Faelin chasing him. He took out a Death Wave Scroll which radiated a profound dark energy.

One second, two seconds, three seconds, potent death energy began spreading outward like ripples on the surface of a pond and swept over everything in a 20 meter radius.

The death energy surged out like a tidal wave, swallowing up every Faelin in the vicinity.

-1,000, -1,000, -1,000... A blanket of damage values rose up into the sky.

All the Faelins halted in their tracks and shuddered violently.

Nie Yan maintained the aggro of the Faelins while running a giant loop around them. When the Death Wave Scrolls went off cooldown, he activated another one. A second tidal wave of death energy surged out and engulfed the Faelins.

Whenever the Faelins caught up to him, Nie Yan would escape with Disappear. Afterwards, he would reappear by activating another Death Wave Scroll.

One scroll, two scrolls, three scrolls... after Nie Yan used the sixth Death Wave Scroll, swaths of Faelins let out mournful moans and fell dead to the ground. Their corpses were strewn everywhere while loot glittered across the landscape.

More Faelins rushed up from the back. Nie Yan used one Death Wave Scroll after the other.

The Faelins were being harvested like wheat, collapsing in droves.

Nie Yan heard series of crisp jingles. Checking his character status bar, he had already reached Level 49. It was much harder to level the higher you climbed. However, you were rewarded generously for hunting monsters far above your own level, and his was rising by leaps and bounds.

Nie Yan picked up all the loot that dropped from the Faelins. He collected a total of 36 pieces of equipment. However, all of them were Level 80, so they were only good for padding the treasury. He also found two Junior Revive skill books which left him pleasantly surprised.

Junior Revive skill books were still rare, with perhaps only 1 in 50,000 Priests knowing the spell. The current price of a single Junior Revive skill book had inflated to several thousand gold.

Junior Revive skill books would only start becoming widespread when players reached Level 60, at which point monsters started dropping them at a dramatically increased rate. By then, all Priests would know the skill, and the price of the skill book would drop down to just 1 gold. However, that was still a bit of a ways off.

Farming Junior Revive skill books here wasn't a bad idea. Right now, Asskickers United only had nine Priests who knew Junior Revive. For every additional Priest that learned the skill, another 20-player team in the guild would have the chances of them wiping during a difficult dungeon run substantially reduced. A dungeon that might have previously taken over a dozen attempts to clear would now only take a few at most.

Ordinary players couldn't hunt monsters over Level 60 yet. Nie Yan was perhaps the only player who dared to level in a Level 80 map, let alone one with such a high mob density.

Besides the two Junior Revive skill books, nothing else worth mentioning dropped.

Nie Yan continued levelling as groups of Faelins fell one after the other. He left a long unbroken trail of corpses behind him.

The Faelins weren't respawning fast enough, so Nie Yan had no choice but to set off deeper into the map.

Nie Yan would receive a 50% increase to all stats by class advancing. The category of his attack and defense would change from Ordinary to Enhanced, making them almost 80% higher than equal-levelled players who hadn't class advanced. His Cloaking and other class-related stats would also receive bonuses.

Class advancement to an ordinary Thief was like adding wings to a tiger. When a player normally reached Level 50, they would elect to attempt their class advancement first. Like this, their levelling efficiency would greatly improve. But since Nie Yan was using Death Wave Scrolls to level, class advancement wouldn't speed up the process. So what was the harm in grinding out a few more levels?

Nie Yan's level continued skyrocketing. By evening, he had reached Level 54, the same as Tang Yao and Bloodlust Mad Blade. He checked his inventory. He had only used a little less than 200 out of 1,000 Death Wave Scrolls!

Tang Yao happened to see Nie Yan's level while checking his friends list. His eyes practically popped out in shock, clearly recalling Nie Yan was only Level 40 the last time he checked earlier in the day. How did Nie Yan jump a total of 14 levels in the span of just a few short hours? This levelling speed was simply too frightening!

「Nie Yan, where the hell are you levelling? I've been searching everywhere for a good spot to grind. That bastard Mad Blade is still right on my tail and catching up fast. This pressure is driving me nuts! Yet here you are are jumping 14 levels in just a few hours!」

Tang Yao exclaimed. Bizzare was the most apt description for this situation.

「Open up the greater map of Calore and search for the coordinates: 18295.23829.38920. I'll help you level up. You should do your class advancement too. I bet Mad Blade has already succeeded his,」Nie Yan replied. The only explanation for Mad Blade's unusual levelling speed was that he successfully class advanced.

「I understand. Guo Huai told me not to lose the number one position to Mad Blade no matter what. I'm afraid I'll be overtaken if I try to class advance. That would be a blow to our guild's prestige,」Tang Yao explained. He was also a prominent public figure of Asskickers United.

「Sharpening the axe won't delay the chopping. I'll quickly help you get your level up, then you can go class advance.」

Nie Yan checked the harvest from these past several hours of grinding. His mobbing speed was nothing short of monstrous. Thanks to the increased drop rates from hunting monsters above his level, he filled up three entire bags with equipment. On top of this, he also picked up seven Junior Revive skill books. He had really made a killing.

Chapter 360 - Sulgata's Runic Cloth

Nie Yan estimated the market price of Death Wave Scrolls on the surface was at least 200 gold. Few people could use such a precious item as lavishly as him. In this levelling session alone, he had gone through 40,000 gold's worth of Death Wave Scrolls. Not even the Century Financial Group would dare to burn gold away so audaciously. However, the price of a Death Wave Scroll was only 2 gold in the Underworld. So in reality he had only spent 400 gold in exchange for 7 Levels and over 20,000 gold's worth of equipment.

Nie Yan had Guo Huai send over a Thief to deliver all the loot he collected back to the guild.

「I recently picked up seven Junior Revive skill books. Make sure they go to talented Priests,」Nie Yan informed. A sharp blade required good steel. It was important these seven skill books didn't go to waste.

Guo Huai was stunned. A Junior Revive skill book was worth at least several thousand gold. Every time one appeared up for auction, there would always be a mad scramble, with wealthy players frequently raising the bidding price to ludicrous levels. Asskickers United naturally wouldn't acquire Junior Revive skill books for such overinflated prices. However, due to their abysmally low drop rates, the guild had only accumulated nine thus far, finding one or two every five to six days. So of course Nie Yan collecting seven in just one afternoon was mind boggling!

「Just where did you get so many Junior Revive skill books?」Guo Huai couldn't help but ask.

「I'm grinding in a Level 80 map, so I'll probably be finding more,」Nie Yan replied. He thought for a moment, then added,「Tell Sun, Bladelight, Smoke Stub, and the rest to get over here. I'll help them level up a bit.」It was meaningless to just raise his own level. He had to raise the levels of the core guild members as well!

Guo Huai quickly got to work.

Nie Yan stopped levelling up further after reaching Level 54. Instead, he diverted all his incoming experience to Lil' Gold, whose level quickly soared to Level 45 and was fast approaching Level 50.

Lil' Gold reached over 6,000 health, his attack power and defense increasing considerably as well. This Golden Dragon was starting to become an unrivalled hegemon among pets.

A while later, Tang Yao arrived. Nie Yan brought him to do some quick levelling. When Tang Yao saw groups of Level 80 Faelins collapsing one after another, he could hardly contain his shock. With this kind of method, how could someone possibly not level quickly!? He had previously been farming monsters above his level too, but at most they were Level 60. He would never dare to venture in a Level 80 map.

It wasn't long before Sun, Smoke Stub, Bladelight, Young Seven, and the others arrived as well. There were 20 players in total, all of whom elites of Asskickers United.

"The journey here was really dangerous. We passed by so many Level 60 and 70 mobs! How did you end up stumbling into a place like this?" Smoke Stub asked. It seemed like there was no place Nie Yan didn't dare to go!

Nie Yan chuckled. "Well, the mobs here are all Level 80 Faelins. You should be careful."

Nie Yan divided up his Death Wave Scrolls among the group. Everyone would set off in different directions to grind. The Warriors and Thieves would do all the hunting while the Mages would stay on the sidelines leeching experience.

Nie Yan estimated everyone would at least be Level 50 by the time all the Death Wave Scrolls were used up.

Sun approached Nie Yan. "Big Brother, I got that fragment of Sulgata's Shadow you wanted me to find. Here it is."

Sun took out a drabby and ancient-looking roll of cloth from his bag. Sulgata's Runic Cloth was located in a Level 30 map, hidden in a labyrinth filled with various deadly mechanisms not just anybody could get past. There were some traps that could easily kill a Level 70 Thief.

Nie Yan accepted the cloth and examined its properties.

Sulgata's Runic Cloth (Legendary Fragment)

Description: A fragment of Sulgata's Shadow. This cloth is brimming with a mysterious magical power.

Properties: Focus +20, Cloaking +20

Nie Yan placed Sulgata's Runic Cloth in his bag along with Sulgata's Boots. Following a flash of light, the cloth melted into the boots before vanishing entirely.

Nie Yan examined the boots which glistened with a peculiar luster, a clear contrast from before.

Sulgata's Cloth Boots (Legendary Fragment)

Requirements: 330 Strength

Description: These boots can be equipped due to the remnant magical power contained within. The player must seek out all fragments (Sulgata's Boots, Sulgata's Feather, and Sulgata's Runic Cloth) to restore Sulgata's Shadow.

Properties: Dexterity +50, Speed +20, Jump +20, Cloaking +20, Reflex +20

Steal (Rank 7): Allows the player to steal money or items from players and monsters.

Shadow Waltz (Rank 7): Stealth +50, Cloaking +50, Speed +50; 2 seconds of invincibility upon activation; cannot be detected through stealth for the first 12 seconds.

Restrictions: None

Sulgata's Cloth Boots had undergone a massive transformation. This was especially true for Steal and Shadow Waltz, both fairly rare skills, which went up from rank Rank 3 to Rank 7. Shadow Waltz also gained 2 seconds of invincibility, putting it above Gale Step in terms of usefulness.

Sun had truly helped Nie Yan out a great deal.

Nie Yan wondered how much Sun had improved since their last meeting. He remembered passing down all the Shadow Dancer techniques that Sun had displayed in his past life.

Nie Yan was confident Sun would master them quickly, especially since he was their original inventor in the previous timeline.

"So, how's your progress with the techniques I taught you from before?" Nie Yan asked in anticipation.

"Out of the seven techniques you showed me, I only learned two of them, Shadow Steps and Illusion Steps. These Shadow Dancer techniques are too difficult. I still can't pull some of them off even after practicing hundreds of times. I guess I'm just too stupid..." Sun rubbed his head. He was worried about being scolded, since he believed Nie Yan had mastered all the techniques while he could only use two at an elementary level. In reality, his comprehension ability already far surpassed ordinary players.

Nie Yan himself had only mastered Shadow Steps and Death's Dance. Although Illusion Steps was somewhat easier than Death's Dance, it still required remarkable comprehension ability. He was truly in awe of Sun's talent for having gained basic mastery over Shadow Steps and Illusion Steps in such a short time. Some people were just born to play the Thief class.

Nie Yan had only been middle of the pack in his past life. He was like a clumsy idiot compared to the outstanding geniuses, having only picked up a few things through watching their videos religiously. Even though he ultimately failed to become a Shadow

Dancer, he still left behind a colourful mark! A nobody like him took down Cao Xu, a mighty overlord whose influence spanned the entire Viridian Empire!

Even though Nie Yan enjoyed the benefits of reincarnation in this life, it was only a temporary advantage. Someone would eventually surpass him. Perhaps one day, there would be many players superior to him. However, he was still the guild leader of Asskickers United. This was an undeniable fact. He was looking forward to seeing the talents he recruited pass him one after the other. When that time came, he could rest easy. Whenever something came up, he wouldn't need to personally take action.

“Mhm, not bad. You should show me the Illusion Steps later, I still haven't mastered it,” Nie Yan said openly. If he couldn't, he couldn't, simple as that. There was no need to hide this to save face. His talent was inferior to Sun's, a fact he had long since accepted. He could only continue improving by learning from others; otherwise, he would just fall further and further behind—and that would be the true shame.

“Even big brother hasn't mastered the Illusion Steps?” Sun asked in surprise.

“I've only mastered Shadow Steps and Death's Dance of the seven techniques,” Nie Yan answered. Shadow Dancer techniques were simply far too difficult. Most Shadow Dancers in the previous timeline could only perform two or three of them, making Sun's rapid mastery over two of them absolutely absurd.

“I thought Big Brother had already mastered all seven of these techniques.”

“Nobody excels at everything. Learning Shadow Dancer techniques requires talent, and yours is better than mine. Keep working hard.” Nie Yan smiled. Sun was already both hardworking and talented. He was destined for success.

“Of these seven Shadow Dancer techniques, I felt that Shadow

Steps was the easiest and Death's Dance the hardest. I still can't get the pacing right for that one. I only mastered the Illusion Steps by accident, so I thought my inability to learn all seven was a sign of my stupidity," Sun admitted with a clearly relieved look on his face. The fact that Nie Yan hadn't mastered all seven techniques didn't lower Sun's regard for him at all. His big brother would always be the true number one in his heart. After all, the seven techniques were only supplementary, not an all-encompassing measurement of strength.

When Bladelight and the others witnessed Nie Yan confessing his inferiority to Sun, they couldn't help but feel a tinge of admiration. Nie Yan being the leader of Asskickers United absolutely wasn't due to luck. Strength wasn't the only thing required in a leader. Humility was important too.

A guild was a reflection of its leader. Asskickers United's tenaciousness, unyielding attitude, and unwavering loyalty were all influenced by Nie Yan!

Nie Yan and the others started spreading out, using the Death Wave Scrolls to clear the Faelins. By the end, all of them would be around Level 52-53. More importantly, if Bladelight, Smoke Stub, Young Seven, and the others successfully class advanced, they could capture the stronghold at the heart of Greater Calore.

Chapter 361 - Blaze Step

The rest of the evening was spent levelling, which continued when everyone logged back on the next day. Lil' Gold reached Level 50. He had already grown far larger in size, with Nie Yan only reaching his waist. Such a large Golden Dragon appearing in front of ordinary players would surely elicit cries of shock and terror.

Lil' Gold's health increased to almost 9,000, and he also learned two new skills.

Dragon Fireball: Ranged Single-Target Chaos Attack. Range: 50 meters. Attack Interval: 3 seconds.

Dragon Fireball was a long-ranged attack. Few casters had attacks that could reach over 50 meters, so it was definitely useful.

Blaze Step (Junior): The Golden Dragon ignites everything it passes through within a 5 meter radius ablaze, leaving behind a trail of fire which continues to burn for 20 seconds. Duration: 3 minutes. Cooldown: 30 minutes. Ranks up at Level 100.

Blaze Step was an area-of-effect skill. Lil' Gold's Speed had reached 378, which was only slightly slower than Nie Yan.

With these two new skills, Lil' Gold's strength greatly increased. As a Golden Dragon, he was already a top-tier pet. But thanks to the effects of the Evolution Crystal, he became all the more amazing, to the extent his growth far surpassed anyone's imagination. Even Nie Yan would find it difficult to take him down.

Nie Yan's mind trembled when he read over Blaze Step's description. This skill was made for mobbing! It wouldn't lose out to any area-of-effect spell!

Nie Yan didn't use the Death Wave Scrolls like before, instead ordering Lil' Gold to attract the aggro of the mobs. Following a

Dragon Breath, a group of Faelins immediately descended on him. Lil' Gold quickly turned back and ran but not before activating Blaze Step, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

Several dozen Faelins chased after Lil' Gold and dove headlong into the flames, causing damage values to float up above their heads. The flames only dealt 100 or so damage due to the level difference. But since they continued to burn, the Faelins took damage every second, which accumulated quickly. As time passed, their health bars slowly drained until they finally collapsed dead on the ground, leaving behind a trail of corpses.

It appeared Nie Yan could use Blaze Step to level, which would save him a lot of Death Wave Scrolls. The mobbing speed wasn't too bad either.

「What's everyone's levels at now?」Nie Yan asked in voice chat.

「I'm Level 53,」Smoke Stub said.

「I'm Level 52,」Sun said.

「I just hit Level 50.」

...

Everyone had at least reached Level 50. Many were a high enough level to storm the top 10 on the level leaderboards. But almost all of them had chosen to remain anonymous, so their names didn't appear.

Tang Yao had reached Level 56. He was once more far ahead of Mad Blade. The amount of experience between a single level past Level 50 was enormous. Mad Blade would have to spend at least several days grinding nonstop to catch up.

A little earlier. Mad Blade, clad in a full set of Level 50 Gold-grade equipment, was currently levelling in the middle of the wilderness. He had already class advanced to a Great Berserker. He was going all out, cutting down one Level 60 Elite after another. He was quickly closing the gap between him and Tang Yao. Obtaining the

number one position would be a great morale boost for the dispirited guild members of Bloodlust Blades. Just after he finished taking down a Level 60 Elite, he glanced at the leaderboards, only to see Tang Yao had reached Level 55.

Seeing Tang Yao pulling further ahead, Mad Blade increased his pace. But to his dismay, the gap was only growing wider. It was almost as if his opponent was on steroids. Not long after reaching Level 55, Tang Yao levelled up again.

Mad Blade stared at the leaderboards with a look of disbelief on his face. He had put in so much blood and sweat to catch up. But when he had almost achieved his goal, Tang Yao opened the gap again. How could he not find this hard to accept?

Tang Yao's levelling speed shocked many players. He could even level this quickly beyond Level 50? This guy was from another world!

Despite Tang Yao holding his position for over a month, everybody was expecting Mad blade to overtake him. Who could've expected the tides to turn so abruptly.

Although Tang Yao wasn't as famous as Nie Yan, he was still ranked number one on the leaderboards, not to mention he had held that position for so long. He could be considered one of Asskickers United's gold signboards. If he fell, the guild's reputation would surely take a hit. But for now, his legend remained firmly standing, showing no signs of collapse. Mad Blade's efforts had all been but futile.

If Tang Yao was only pulling ahead bit by bit, Mad Blade might still have a chance by changing up his levelling methods. However, Tang Yao's level had skyrocketed at a speed that could best be described as inhuman. This struck a fatal blow to Mad Blade's confidence. Even if he spent several more gruelling days catching up, who was to say Tang Yao wouldn't just do the same thing again? In that case, what was the point?

Nie Yan and the others were still grinding Faelins.

「Have you guys found any Junior Revive skill books?」Nie Yan asked.「Given how long we've been grinding, I'm sure we've obtained quite a few.」

「I found one.」

「I picked up two.」

Nie Yan counted 10 Junior Revive skill books in total. Their drop rate here was astonishing. Thanks to these skill books, they would have another 10 Priests who could cast Junior Revive!

「I'm out of Death Wave Scrolls, so I'll be returning to Calore to do my class advancement. You guys should do the same as well,」Nie Yan said after checking his bag.

「Later, Boss!」

「Bye, Big Brother!」

...

Nie Yan activated a Return Scroll. With a flash of light, he returned to Calore. Since it was a new day, he visited the various auction houses and listed up 90 pieces of equipment in total, all of which were much higher quality than the ones from the day prior. He only dropped by the auction houses that showed the fiercest competition on the first batch. As for the auction houses where the equipment sold for a low price, he didn't bother visiting them again.

The second batch of sales immediately stirred up several cities. Those who had the wealth immediately rushed to the auction houses or opened up the Super Trade Channel to fight over the equipment.

“He's finally selling again! Thankfully, that guy still has Night Vision equipment left. No matter what, I have to get a piece today! If he runs out, I won't even have time to weep!”

The vast majority of players didn't lack money. Especially the whales who had purchased a large amount of gold in preparation for exactly this moment. As soon as Nie Yan put up the equipment for auction, they started a frantic bidding war, raising the prices to frightening heights.

Add this to the fact the equipment today was of a much higher quality, and Nie Yan was sure to make a killing!

The chaotic scene in the auction houses left the players of Calore speechless. This was the largest spectacle they had ever seen, with wealthy players frantically fighting over only several pieces of equipment.

All 90 pieces of equipment were sold in no time. Each one went for more than 4,000 gold, some even over 5,000. The total profit was 420,000 gold, a shocking figure!

When the commotion finally settled down, Guo Huai sent Nie Yan a message.「How did it go? How much gold did we make?」

「420,000 gold,」Nie Yan replied. This was only the beginning. The Viridian Empire's market was far from being saturated!

Guo Huai was blown away. This was amazing! With that much gold, not only could they resolve their current problems, it would even aid in the guild's development!

「I'll leave 200,000 gold to payout any bounties that might come up. I'll also leave 120,000 gold to restock the treasury, increase the number of guild expeditions, and pay out more merit points. I'm going to invest the remaining 100,000 gold into the Starry Night Potion. I want to upgrade every branch to Tier 7!」

Upgrading to Tier 5 only required a few hundred gold, whereas upgrading to Tier 7 required several thousand. With so many branches in need of upgrading, Nie Yan would definitely have to spend a lot of gold. After upgrading the shops, he planned to hire a large amount of Alchemists, Tinkerers, Enchanters, and so on,

cornering every market!

Nie Yan already had a blueprint in his mind. He also planned to acquire more auction houses and link them all up with the Super Trade Channel!

Since funds were ample, Nie Yan could fulfil his ambitions without worry. He deposited 320,000 gold into Guo Huai's personal storage. Afterwards, he headed to the Starry Night Potion Shop and handed over 100,000 gold to Bird, telling him to expand the business according to the plans they previously discussed.

The main branch of the Starry Night Potion Shop in Calore was already a Tier 7 Shop. He would have to upgrade it to at least Tier 10! Not to mention he would have to increase the number of NPC employees to 30 at minimum! This place was packed with customers every day. Not upgrading wasn't an option!

With the recent popularity of Night Vision Equipment, and Asskickers United's money troubles suddenly disappearing, many people could deduce the person behind this all was Nie Yan. The upcoming massive expansion of the Starry Night Potion Shop would also likely be attributed to him. But so what? This was the time for Asskickers United to show off their strength!

Chapter 362 - Great Thief Class

Advancement Quest

The rapid development of the Starry Night Potion Shop naturally drew the attention of many eyes. Every branch was upgraded to Tier 7, while the main store became Tier 10. Just how much gold did all this cost? Thanks to this demonstration of wealth by the Starry Night Potion Shop, not to mention the salaries they offered were much higher compared to the past, Alchemists once more flooded their doors.

Besides the Starry Night Potion Shop, which was an unrivalled hegemon in the Viridian Empire's alchemy industry, Nie Yan was also rapidly developing his businesses in other industries such as Tinkering, Blacksmithing, Enchanting, and Salvaging. However, since these markets were relatively small, there was no widespread recruitment campaign. He only hired enough players to open up two or three shops, but they were all notable in his past life.

For the Starry Night Potion Shop to achieve its current dominance was already impressive. The competition in other markets was fierce. Just gaining a foothold was extremely difficult. You needed absolute assurance for such an undertaking, or you were better off not trying at all. Better slow and steady than quick and rash. Many companies frequently failed because they expanded too rapidly from the start.

After every branch of the Starry Night Potion Shop was upgraded, Nie Yan predicted daily profits would rise to over 30,000 gold. As player demand for potions continued to grow, so too would the profits.

With the Starry Night Potion Shop and Asskickers United both recently making large movements, many players suspected they belonged to the same group, which explained their close relationship. If Asskickers United had the support of the Starry

Night Potion Shop, it was no wonder they could last against Bloodlust Blades for so long.

The name Nirvana Flame garnered so much reverence in part because of his outstanding skill but more so his powerful background.

...

Nie Yan headed to the Thief Association to start his class advancement quest, which was divided into five difficulties: Easy, Normal, Hard, Expert, and Specialist. Clearing it on Hard difficulty or higher gave an additional item reward; otherwise, everything was the same. It was rumoured the reward for beating the Specialist difficulty was a Legendary item. However, he didn't dare to confirm this. In the previous timeline, countless experts including Sun had tried, but none succeeded.

Specialist was simply too difficult and the penalties for failing too severe, which included being barred from attempting the class advancement quest again for 10 days. Nie Yan didn't dare to take this risk. At most, he would try it on Expert.

Before long, Nie Yan arrived outside the doorsteps of the Thief Association. The wooden building with a steeple at the top looked worn-down as though it had weathered many centuries. It carried a unique architectural style.

Nie Yan stepped inside and was greeted by a dark hall, filled with rows of shabby desks and chairs and without a single source of light. There were several cloaked NPCs standing up ahead. Their appearances were hidden, with only sharp pairs of eyes revealing their presence in the darkness.

NPC Thieves generally liked to wear cloaks. This was due to a legend passed down by the Thief Association.

One day long ago, a cloaked traveller encountered three Death Custodians carrying out a slaughter while passing through a

village. With nothing but his bare hands, he killed one of them and obtained a sharp dagger called Hades' Nail. He used the dagger to kill the second Death Custodian and obtained a technique to turn invisible. He finally snuck behind the last Death Custodian and pierced its heart, obtaining the power of the shadows.

This action angered the death god. So in order to avoid being hunted down, the cloaked traveler never revealed their appearance again.

This was the origin of the Thief. However, it was only a folktale and not something people took seriously.

Nie Yan walked forward and spotted a slim player sitting in a chair, listening to one of the NPCs. They were probably attempting their class advancement quest too.

There currently weren't many Thieves who could attempt class advancement. The slim player looked somewhat familiar.

Nie Yan recalled this fellow was Skinny Dog, a player from Victorious Return. It seemed enemies were destined to cross paths time and time again. They could even meet in a place like this.

Nie Yan glanced at the five NPC Thieves up ahead. All of them could give out the class advancement quest.

Nie Yan directly walked forward.

When Skinny Dog heard footsteps behind him, he turned to see Nie Yan. He quickly stood up and greeted in a nervous manner, "B-b-boss Nirvana Flame!" Realizing his slip of the tongue, his face flushed red with embarrassment.

Ever since he had died twice at the hands of Nie Yan, Skinny Dog would repeatedly review the recordings of their battles among others while frantically honing his skills. But every time a new video of Nie Yan appeared, he would feel a deep sense of powerlessness, telling him he would never reach this person's level no matter how much he practiced. Nie Yan was practically a god-

like existence in his heart.

Nie Yan's techniques were extremely profound. The more Skinny Dog researched them, the more fear and admiration he felt.

Nie Yan couldn't help but be amused by how Skinny Dog referred to him. After musing the thought, he felt there was no point in making things difficult for the guy. After all, the two of them weren't even on the same level.

"Ah, you're here too?" Nie Yan smiled faintly at Skinny Dog before walking up to one of the NPC Thieves.

Seeing Nie Yan's smile, Skinny Dog gawked as his heart trembled. He never expected Nie Yan to greet him back. Such an esteemed figure could easily ignore a small character like him. Suddenly recalling their hostile relationship, he silently left the Thief Association after receiving his class advancement quest.

Skinny Dog no longer had the face to take revenge. He was nothing more than a speck of dust on the road compared to Nie Yan.

When Nie Yan turned around, Skinny Dog had already departed. He sat down in front of one of the NPC Thieves.

Great Thief Featherston: Level 60

Featherston turned to Nie Yan and asked, "Dancer of the shadows, Nirvana Flame, do you have the determination to advance to a Great Thief?"

Do you wish to accept the Great Thief class advancement quest?
Difficulty: Expert.

Yes!

You have accepted the Great Thief class advancement quest.

"Avarice leads to depravity. The Nilan Colosseum, situated in the north of the Ishberg Mountains, is a famous gambling establishment. They've hoodwinked countless people out of their

money. Many rich merchants from the big cities visit and gamble their gold away recklessly. But business came to a stop two months ago, when a group of Thieves from the Evil Faction raided the place. They slaughtered more than 10 civilians and took 100 hostages, locking them up in cages and demanding ransom from their families for their release. Those wishing for quick riches will inevitably fall to evil and suffer the punishment of the temple. Brave Adventurer, are you willing to help us save the hostages?”

“Yes, Sir Featherston. I’m willing!”

Rescued Hostages: (0/100)

The Great Thief class advancement quest was random for everyone. Nie Yan never expected to receive a hostage rescue mission.

“Here, take these 100 Instant Transfer Scrolls. The Evil Faction Thieves are extremely powerful. Remember not to fight them head-on under any circumstances. Just hand the scrolls to the hostages, and they’ll be able to safely escape,” Featherston instructed.

Nie Yan accepted the 100 Instant Transfer Scrolls and stored them in his bag. He had obtained an important clue from Featherston. It appeared the Evil Faction Thieves were far stronger than him, meaning killing them was likely impossible. He would have to rely on stealth to solve this quest.

Stealth was indisputably the most useful tool in a Thief’s arsenal! So the Great Thief class advancement quest testing his stealth proficiency was no surprise.

Nie Yan continued chatting with Featherston to inquire more information about the quest.

Afterwards, Nie Yan left the Thief Association and headed to a general store to stock up on consumables.

「Nirvana Flame.」Yao Yao sent Nie Yan a message.

「What's the matter? How's your progress with Karsi's Blessing?」Nie Yan asked. Yao Yao's sweet voice was like a spring breeze in his mind. He immediately thought of Xie Yao, despite their voices sounding nothing alike since Conviction changed that aspect too.

These past few days, Nie Yan had been escorting Xie Yao to and back from school. The two were much closer than before. However, they deliberately avoided mentioning the embarrassing incident from several days before. Nie Yan was gradually beginning to feel that Xie Yao and Yao Yao were the same person. However, it was only a vague feeling, and he had no way of confirming. Every time he chatted with either of the two girls, he made zero progress in finding out. Directly asking her would also be rude, since she might be keeping it from him for a reason.

「I've already finished the second part in the quest chain. Now I'm doing the third,」Yao Yao replied. She had been in a sealed map the last few days, so she had no way of contacting the outside world. As soon as she got out, she messaged Nie Yan.

「Nice! What level are you?」Nie Yan asked. He was surprised Yao Yao actually completed the second quest in the Karsi's Blessing questline. Its difficulty was extremely high, and many top experts failed it in the previous timeline.

「Level 52.」

「You can do your class advancement quest now,」Nie Yan said. Given she completed the second quest in Karsi's Blessing, Yao Yao could be considered one of the top players in Asskickers United.

Nie Yan recalled the previous timeline. Although Yao Yao was skilled, she was in no way a peak expert, or even an expert. He never expected his butterfly effect to be so great. She had joined the ranks of top experts because of his influence. This could only mean her talent was in no way inferior to the likes of Bladelight, Young Seven, Undying Scoundrel, and the others.

Yao Yao was slightly annoyed. Nie Yan seemed to only care about

matters regarding the game whenever they chatted.

「How's the guild doing?」Yao Yao asked. She had already ordered the Dragonsoar Financial Group to amass gold nonstop. During this time, they had provided Asskickers United with well over 200,000 gold.

「The crisis has passed. The ones who should be worrying now aren't us but rather Bloodlust Blades,」Nie Yan said with a faint chuckle.

Chapter 363 - Contempt

During his conversation with Yao Yao, Nie Yan recalled the items he had obtained in his recent adventures. He decided to gift her Akeph's Hand of Knowledge, sending it to her through the mail. He deposited the other piece of Sub Legendary-grade equipment, Ina's Prayer Gloves, into his personal storage.

He knew this gesture was only a pittance compared to everything she had done for him in his past life—and this one if his suspicions about her being Xie Yao were confirmed true.

Yao Yao's voice was like a clear running stream, washing away all the worries in Nie Yan's mind.

She felt relieved after learning that Asskickers United's troubles were resolved while she was stuck in the sealed map.

The Dragonsoar Financial Group could match the Century Financial Group's gold gathering speed for a day or two without any issue. But any longer and they would almost certainly burn out.

Including himself and Yao Yao, Nie Yan counted more than 60 players who were currently eligible to class advance in Asskickers United. He believed these players had a high chance of advancing even further in the future. This kind of growth potential could only be matched by a handful of guilds in Conviction, such as Angel Corps in the Satreen Empire and Fallen Angel in the Undead Empire.

Nie Yan teleported to Ishberg, a peaceful town near the Ishberg Mountains. There were newly built homes with well-kept lawns and flourishing flower beds everywhere. One could imagine how wealthy the residents of this place were.

The NPC residents on the streets walked with hurried footsteps, the expressions on their faces filled with worry.

Nie Yan recalled visiting Ishberg at Level 60 during his past life. Any NPC resident you randomly encountered would give you a quest to hunt Evil Faction Thieves after chatting with them for a bit. The reward was quite generous, so many players would come here in teams to farm gold.

Nie Yan was surprised he had received this hostage rescue mission as a class advancement quest. He walked out of town and summoned his Faulkner Warhorse before galloping away towards the northern part of the Ishberg Mountains.

Nie Yan encountered Level 60 Thorny Treants in his path. They were covered in ash gray bark, resembling giant stumps with sharp thorns growing out of them. Their attack power and defense were formidable.

Advancing through the rugged mountain path on horseback, Nie Yan heard the intense crackling of magic in a ravine off in the distance. This is a Level 60 map. I wonder which guild sent a team here to level?

Nie Yan recalled that a Level 60 Lord spawned in that specific ravine. Any group of players that could hunt such a powerful monster definitely wasn't simple. He pondered for a moment before ultimately deciding to head over there to investigate.

Standing above a steep cliff, Nie Yan looked down and spotted a coal-black Thorny Treant in a heated battle against a group of 70 players. The Fighters were at the front while the Mages were raining down magic from the back.

Only a few guilds in Calore were capable of taking on a Level 60 Lord: Asskickers United, Holy Empire, Sapphire Shrine, Radiant Sacred Flame, and Victorious Return. The rest were all too weak.

Nie Yan discovered this group of players was an expedition team from Victorious Return. They were quite powerful, with all of them around Level 45.

They were battling the Thorny Treant Lord in a half-moon formation. A squad of Thieves relentlessly assaulted the monster from behind.

The Mages were scattered further in the back, perched on top of boulders, trees, and ledges; any place that gave a suitable vantage point.

Victorious Return... Eh? Nie Yan's lips parted into a devious smile. He didn't have the time to tangle with these players. But it wasn't his style to just leave quietly, not to mention he was the guild leader of Asskickers United. People would laugh at him!

At minimum Nie Yan had to let these players know he was here!

Nie Yan jumped off the cliff and started descending down to the ravine below. His fingers danced around in the air, and he mumbled a series of incantations. A moment later, Lil' Gold appeared in front of him. Man and dragon walked side by side.

"Worldly, the Thorny Treant Lord will summon vines soon. Make sure you're prepared after it howls. You have to guard your position no matter what!" a Holy Mage calmly instructed. He was called Fresh Fish, the top Holy Mage in Victorious Return. He was in charge of leading this expedition team in taking down the Thorny Treant Lord.

"Sky Piercer, Magic Booster!"

"Alright!" Liu Rui answered. He buffed Fresh Fish with Magic Booster, which increased casting speed.

Liu Rui's character was called Sky Piercer. He was currently Level 44 and ranked among the top 50 in Victorious Return. He used to be proud of this achievement, but now it was just a constant reminder of his humiliation. He had just received word from Feiyun that Xie Yao had already reached Level 52. This was simply too shocking. What's more, she wore at least 3 pieces of Sub Legendary-grade equipment, which was viewed as godly

equipment by players!

Liu Rui felt a deep sense of inferiority when he compared himself to Xie Yao. Were she only one or two levels ahead of him, perhaps he still stood a chance of catching up. However, the current eight-level gap was like an uncrossable chasm.

Liu Rui knew he could never catch up to Xie Yao, no matter how hard he tried. This held doubly true for that man behind Xie Yao the other day—Nirvana Flame, an immortal legend. How could he possibly contend against such an existence? He was having nightmares of Xie Yao nestled in that man's embrace every time he closed his eyes, which caused him to boil with rage. You're supposed to be mine, Xie Yao! If I can't have you, no one will!

Everything was going smoothly under Fresh Fish's command. The Fighters had firmly locked down the Thorny Treant Lord.

"Keep at it, everyone! The Thorny Treant Lord is almost dead! Priests, pick up the pace. Heal faster!" Fresh Fish tensely shouted. The Thorny Treant Lord had fallen to only 2% health.

Just at this moment, a huge commotion erupted.

"Boss, someone's coming!"

"It's Nirvana Flame. He's with his Golden Dragon!"

Fresh Fish looked at where his players were frantically pointing. He saw a player leisurely descending the slope with a Golden Dragon. His heart shook. Nie Yan's appearance was like a proclamation from the reaper.

Seeing Nie Yan unhurriedly walking towards them, the players from Victorious Return held their breaths.

"What the hell are you guys doing! Kill the Thorny Treant Lord, quickly!" Fresh Fish hollered. Even if Nie Yan took action, they had to secure the drops no matter what!

Nie Yan indifferently glanced at the Thorny Treant Lord. Its

drops were of little interest to him. He was simply passing by. Taking action against these players would be a bit beneath him.

Nie Yan was only 50 meters away. The players from Victorious Return nervously glanced at him while trying to focus on the battle. As they ruthlessly bombarded the Thorny Treant Lord with spells, its skin started turning red.

“Be careful, the Thorny Treant Lord is summoning vines! Protect against it!”

“Hurry up!”

The Thorny Treant Lord let out a deep roar as giant vines erupted out of the ground, ensnaring the players from Victorious Return. Only a few Fighters who were protected by spell shields escaped unscathed.

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」A dense shower of spells rained down on the Thorny Treant Lord. It let out a mournful howl before collapsing on the ground.

Two Fighters rushed forward and secured the loot that dropped.

Fresh Fish breathed a sigh of relief, feeling as if a heavy weight was lifted from his shoulders. He glanced back at Nie Yan, who was slowly walking towards them. What happened next was out of their control.

The players from Victorious Return were bound by the vines of the Thorny Treant Lord. They gazed at Nie Yan slowly approaching them. He was only 10 meters away. Lil' Gold, whose immense size caused them to shiver in fear, snorted out a few flames from his snout. When his bell-sized eyes swept over the crowd, they felt their hearts tighten in their chests.

In stark contrast, Nie Yan was completely carefree. He arrogantly gazed at them before continuing on his way.

“Heed my order! No one is allowed to attack first!” Fresh Fish feared Nie Yan was baiting them, trying to get them to make the

first move so the game would think he was acting in self-defense. He refused to bite, deathly afraid of being hooked by Nie Yan's lure.

However, Nie Yan's presence gave them a lot of pressure. Was he planning to slaughter them?

These 70 players were all staring at Nie Yan. The vines ensnaring them slowly unraveled. As he arrived in front of them, like a prophet parting the sea, the members of Victorious Return stepped off to the side one after another to let him pass.

Nie Yan's indifference weighed heavily on their minds. He was but one man surrounded by 70, yet they were too scared to make a move. They could only nervously form a loose circle around him.

This was a type of undisguised contempt!

Even if all of them attacked, Nie Yan wouldn't fear them in the slightest.

Nie Yan along with Lil' Gold walked through them, as if he was enjoying a casual stroll.

Fresh Fish raised his staff before lowering it back down. With a single word, he could order all 70 or so players under his command to simultaneously attack Nie Yan. However, the scene of Nie Yan slaughtering dozens of players from Bloodlust Blades flashed through his mind. He trembled. If they really took the initiative to attack, the only corpses on the ground would be theirs!

Nie Yan swept his eyes over the crowd. No one dared to meet his gaze. He was practically a god in the flesh in Conviction. His gaze suddenly fell on a certain player, Sky Piercer!

Nie Yan never expected to see Liu Rui here as well. It appeared enemies were destined to cross paths!

Chapter 364 - Super Alliance

Liu Rui watched Nie Yan arrogantly strolling over and felt like an insignificant speck of dust as he stood among the crowd. He recently lost two levels in a row due to being targeted by Thieves from Asskickers United. Only after spending a fortune to acquire a large supply of Unknown Transfer Scrolls did he dare to venture out of the city again, quickly teleporting away at the slightest sign of danger. Every day was miserable, never knowing when the next ambush might happen. He of course knew who the perpetrator behind all this was!

Liu Rui's pride was deeply wounded. He gritted his teeth in anger and humiliation. He already hated Nie Yan to the bone and could barely hold himself back after seeing such a cocky display.

Now the shoe was on the other foot. Liu Rui had used even nastier methods in the previous timeline. Nie Yan planned to thoroughly pay everything back!

Nie Yan's lips curved into a smile of contempt. Liu Rui would never again have the qualifications to compete with him!

Seeing the look of disdain in Nie Yan's eyes, Liu Rui's fury erupted like a volcano. There was only so much he could take. A blazing Arcane Fireball condensed in his palm.

Liu Rui felt confident his teammates wouldn't stand idly by if he took action. At worst the situation would devolve into a full-out battle. It was much better than taking this humiliation lying down!

"Shit! What the fuck are you doing, Sky Piercer!? Stand down, now!" Fresh Fish hollered. But it was too late. Liu Rui shot the Arcane Fireball at Nie Yan.

Lil' Gold stepped forward and blocked the fireball, which exploded into a shower of embers on his golden scales.

Fresh Fish felt his stomach drop like a stone. They had attacked

first, meaning Nie Yan could retaliate against them without facing any repercussion. He raised his staff in preparation for an imminent slaughter.

“Nirvana Flame, I’ll crush you beneath my feet one day!” Liu Rui flared as his face distorted with fury and vitriol.

“You’re welcome to try. Let’s see if you have the skill.” Nie Yan couldn’t even be bothered to spare a glance at such a hollow display. Liu Rui was all bark and zero bite.

At this moment, Lil’ Gold turned his head and shot out a Dragon Fireball. Before Liu Rui could even react, the blazing attack engulfed him in flames.

How could a cloth-armoured Mage withstand a single hit from Lil’ Gold?

Naturally, it was an instant kill!

Liu Rui fell dead to the ground. His clothes were burnt black, and smoke rose up from his corpse.

Lil’ Gold snorted a few flames from his nostrils after making short work of Liu Rui, then looked around, almost as if he were asking if there were any other takers.

The players from Victorious Return felt their blood run cold. Only now did they have an understanding of Lil’ Gold’s terrifying power.

Nie Yan’s expression remained unchanged after killing Liu Rui. However, the players from Victorious Return were shaking in their boots.

Still no one else dared to attack Nie Yan. They were all waiting for Fresh Fish’s command.

Liu Rui actually thought he could instigate everyone into battle. This was simply wishful thinking!

Nie Yan was almost 10 levels above them at Level 54 and geared

out in amazing equipment. Add this to the fact he also had a powerful Level 50 Golden Dragon by his side, and it was no wonder they were hesitant to act.

The Warriors and Berserkers were prepared to rush forward. 「Everybody, remain calm. Don't attack without my orders!」Fresh Fish commanded in voice chat.

Fresh Fish's forehead seeped with cold sweat. He felt like he was walking on a knife's edge. It was still possible to maintain a standoff at this moment. But if things escalated any further, all hell would break loose, at which point no one could predict what might happen. Nie Yan was simply too frightening. Fresh Fish had no idea how to guard against such a Thief.

Everyone's nerves were stretched taught. They would dogpile Nie Yan as soon as he took action.

Fresh Fish raised his staff before lowering it down again in the end. As long as everyone simultaneously attacked Nie Yan, they could obliterate him. He predicted the Golden Dragon wouldn't fare much better off against such an intense barrage of attacks.

But Fresh Fish ultimately didn't dare to take action. Nie Yan was bound to have some aces up his sleeve. Why else would he act so brazenly?

Nie Yan always had assurances. He would never allow himself to fall into a dangerous situation.

Fresh Fish feared they might end up similar to Liu Rui, getting crushed like ants.

Nie Yan and Lil' Gold continued walking forwards as the players from Victorious Return stepped aside and let them pass.

The tension in the air was palpable. They were ready to attack at a moment's notice.

However, Nie Yan didn't show any signs of making a move. From his perspective, thoroughly destroying the fighting spirit and

confidence of the enemy was far more effective than simply killing them.

There was no need for him to take action.

Nie Yan and Lil' Gold leisurely strolled past the crowd, getting further and further away before disappearing into the horizon. Fresh Fish and the others breathed a sigh of relief. Their backs were drenched with cold sweat.

This was the deterring power of Nirvana Flame. His presence alone on the battlefield caused players to feel chills at the back of their necks. No one knew where his Zennarde's Sword would come down next.

Fresh Fish's expedition team could boast about being elites in Victorious Return. But in Asskickers United they didn't amount to anything!

Level 45 players were nothing rare in Asskickers United; there were at least 2,000 of them. Victorious Return would be hard-pressed to find even 300.

At Level 54 Nie Yan was already an untouchable existence.

Their confidence was thoroughly crushed. All of them had dispirited looks on their faces.

"Come on, let's go home." Fresh Fish sighed and started to understand why Nie Yan walked through them but didn't attack. He did something far more cruel than slaughtering all of them. Once a person's spirit was crushed, there was no getting back up.

Everyone started teleporting back to Calore with their Return Scrolls, feeling as if they had just escaped the jaws of death.

Many of the players in the expedition team quit Victorious Return, including Liu Rui. They no longer saw a future in staying there, save for being the targets of ridicule.

Before long, a video of this incident was posted up on the forums.

It spread like wildfire.

This was the arrogance of the Mad Rogue, looking down on the whole world in disdain! He could even frighten an elite expedition team from Victorious Return into submission! The scene of Liu Rui being instantly killed by the Dragon Fireball from Lil' Gold was also hotly discussed.

There was a flood of comments below the video.

「I prostrate myself in worship! What a god!」

「Does anyone know the stats of that Golden Dragon? It's so strong!」

...

Players with nothing better to do with their time started guessing Lil' Gold's stats. Just what sort of attack power was required to instantly kill a Level 44 Mage at full health?

The video became another classic, forever remaining in the minds of the players. Were there ever a day where they could act as brazenly as Nie Yan, they could die happily!

Liu Rui became the biggest laughingstock on the forums. He was ridiculed for overestimating himself, an ant trying to topple a great oak. This fellow actually dared to attack Nirvana Flame. He was practically asking to die!

Players also started taking notice that Victorious Return's glory days were long over. Their players were more cautious and reserved, no longer daring to act as unbridled like in the past where they would close off entire maps to the public. Could this once prestigious guild survive such a fall from grace?

Many players quietly withdrew from Victorious Return. Only the weaker low level players that no other guild would take stayed. The experts left. Since they were once sworn enemies, they couldn't join Asskickers United, so they would try their luck in Sapphire Shrine and Holy Empire. At worst, they would spend a

bit of gold to migrate to another city. They might join the newly arisen War God Tribe or a well established guild like Alliance of Mages, Divine Protectors, or Battle Crazy Alliance. Bloodlust Blades was teetering on the verge of collapse, so no one in their right mind would go there.

Nothing could stop Asskickers United's rise to power. They crushed every enemy in their path without exception.

Even Victorious Return and Bloodlust Blades had become stepping stones for Asskickers United.

Nie Yan took a look at the video while on the road and couldn't help but smile. He wasn't actually the person who had posted it to the forums. Rather it was a disgruntled player over on their side who still felt Victorious Return hadn't lost enough face. Heaven Breaker was probably seething with rage right now.

Victorious Return had eaten a bitter fruit. At this moment, Guo Huai informed Nie Yan that Radiant Sacred Flame and Battle Crazy Alliance had taken the initiative to restart negotiations about a collaboration. They could no longer sit still after recent events, with Asskickers United raising their benefits and the Starry Night Potion Shop upgrading all their branches. After displaying such wealth, it was obvious Bloodlust Blades would be the one to lose!

If they waited for Asskickers United to defeat Bloodlust Blades before reopening negotiations, it would already be too late, and they would have lost all leverage. Asskickers United would recover from their losses far stronger than before, and their position as the overlord of Calore would be even more unshakeable. This was especially true for Radiant Sacred Flame. Since they were based in Calore, they could only beg Asskickers United to show mercy. It would be extremely easy for Asskickers United to devour them.

After receiving the news from Guo Huai, Nie Yan gave his word. They could decide the terms of their alliance right now, but the

investment wouldn't come until at least half a month later. Furthermore, Asskickers United would control a 60% stake in both guilds, not any bit less! There were also finer details that needed to be discussed, but he left that in the hands of Guo Huai.

Guo Huai was more than willing to negotiate with these terms. Asskickers United was absolutely in a stronger position, so they held much of the sway during talks. Even if the other side wasn't willing, they had no choice but to accept!

By acquiring Radiant Sacred Flame and Battle Crazy Alliance, Asskickers United would have a super alliance which also included the War God Tribe, Holy Empire, and Sapphire Shrine. They would be an unstoppable powerhouse in the Viridian Empire!

Chapter 365 - Mana Storage Jewel

The Nilan Colosseum, a grand amphitheatre constructed out of ashen-white stone, was situated halfway up a mountainside. It was built in the year 921 during the Era of Shared Governance and so featured the architectural style of that particular time period. This was represented in the delicate carvings covering the walls. It stood over 30 meters tall with more than several dozen layers, some parts having collapsed due to the passage of time. The interior resembled a labyrinth, with various rooms and corridors connected together. At the center was a large arena flanked on both sides by grandstands which could hold up to 50,000 people.

This was a place where the wealthy squandered their money. The colosseum frequently hosted gladiatorial shows, earning the lion's share of their revenue from patrons gambling on the fights.

The Nilan Colosseum was taken over by a group of Evil Faction Thieves, who had to be defeated for everything to return to normal. Their leader was a Level 70 Variant Lord, an existence which at minimum required a massive expedition team of Level 70 players to deal with. Until then this place would stay under their control.

There were Thieves cloaked in black garbs patrolling the public square up ahead. Their eyes glowed an ominous red as they sporadically popped in and out of sleath.

Theses Thieves looked tough to deal with. Enemies that could stealth were always troublesome.

Nie Yan activated Eye of Truth. Scanning his surroundings, he discovered a faint silhouette. Suddenly, he felt a strange heat flowing to his pupils as his eyes briefly flashed with a piercing red light.

An observer would notice Nie Yan's pupils had turned blood red!

Nie Yan discovered everything seemed a lot clearer; he could make out the finer details of objects nearby, while the ones faraway no longer appeared as hazy. Another 18 silhouettes popped into sight. Out of the 20 something Thieves stealthed in the vicinity, not a single one could evade his eyes!

It turned out the Thief he discovered before was only one of many. Nie Yan would've likely ended up in combat if he had rushed forward just now. These Evil Faction Thieves were Level 70 monsters. There was no way he stood a chance against them!

Thankfully, Eye of Truth had ranked up!

Eye of Truth couldn't be improved solely with frequent use. It required actively uncovering opponents in stealth in and out of combat. This was to prevent players from grinding proficiency in a cheap manner. The system also had other restrictions in place regarding the target of the skill.

Eye of Truth (Enhanced): See through an opponent's disguise or stealth. Success is dependent on the level of the target. Cooldown: 120 seconds.

Nie Yan would have an 80% chance of detecting an equal-level Thief through stealth with the enhanced version of Eye of Truth. His ability to see through a target's disguise was also increased to 70%!

The effectiveness of Eye of Truth greatly increased after ranking up, but there was still a high chance of failure against high level targets.

Nie Yan was always worried about Eye of Truth's effectiveness. Now his prayers were finally answered!

Nie Yan guessed the Thieves he currently spotted with the enhanced version of Eye of Truth probably weren't all of them. There might still be more that had escaped his detection.

I need to rely on my other senses too, not just my sight!

Nie Yan entered stealth and approached the colosseum.

The Evil Faction Thieves were Level 70 monsters. They were powerful in combat, but their stealth detection abilities were very weak. This allowed Nie Yan to sneak past them using stealth.

Nie Yan observed the movements of these Evil Faction Thieves for a while before figuring out a path forward and bypassing a group of them. He continued on and spotted several Thieves passing close to him. He could detect their bloody auras.

After bypassing several more Thieves, Nie Yan suddenly sensed something approaching him from the left. He activated Shadow Waltz and dashed 7 meters forward.

Nie Yan looked back to see an Evil Faction Thief pop out of stealth from his previous position and look around. It failed to discover anything and disappeared again.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Nie Yan looked up ahead. He was only a hundred meters from the entrance to the colosseum, two dark and foreboding metal gates. Thankfully, it wasn't guarded by any monsters. Not too far away was a Gold treasure chest tucked away in a corner.

Nie Yan advanced another 50 meters, whereupon the number of Thieves in the vicinity lessened dramatically. After bypassing a small group of them, he arrived in front of the Gold chest without any problems. He bent down and started opening it.

Opening treasure chest... Progress: 2%... 7%...

A while later, the chest popped open with a click. Nie Yan bent down and fished around before taking out a blue pearl. It was as big as his fist and ice-cold to the touch, resembling a large sapphire as it sparkled with a soft blue radiance. It was perfectly round and smooth, except for a small, pinky-sized hole at the top.

Nie Yan appraised the pearl with Transcendent Insight.

Mana Storage Jewel (2): The player can store mana inside this

jewel, which can be used later on to cast magic. Capacity: 0/5,000 mana. Cooldown: 1 day.

It's a Mana Storage Jewel with a quality rating of 2! Not bad! Nie Yan thought in pleasant surprise.

A Magic Storage Jewel was basically a refillable Mana Potion. And this one could store up to a whopping 5,000 mana! This was equivalent to an Advanced Mana Potion. Since it didn't share a cooldown with Mana Potions, a Mage could use it at a crucial moment to save their life!

At the later stages of the game, Magic Storage Jewels became an essential item to Mages. Players with even a little bit of wealth would carry one. Magic Storage Jewels with a rating of 1 were fairly common while ones with a rating of 2 were rarer. Magic Storage Jewels could only be found starting in Level 70 maps. Such items still hadn't appeared in the marketplace. However, they would probably go for around 9,000 gold.

Nie Yan thought for a moment. It was probably best to give the Magic Storage Jewel to a Priest. Young Seven, Painted Muslin, Black Heaven, any one of them would do. It didn't matter whom since they were all three contracted members. He would give the Magic Storage Jewel to them and let them decide by themselves. These three players had already become the top Priests in Asskickers United. No one else even came close. It was no surprise since they were Archbishops in the previous timeline.

With a Magic Storage Jewel, they would have one more assurance during expeditions.

I always find something nice every time I explore new maps. Nie Yan tossed the Magic Storage Jewel into his bag, then continued making his way forward.

When Nie Yan arrived in front of the entrance, he placed his hands on the metal gates and pushed with all his might.

The metal gates finally gave way with a loud groan, allowing Nie Yan to step inside. The surroundings were dark, and he felt a cold draft blow in his face. In front of him was a winding corridor filled with entrances leading to other rooms on both sides.

Nie Yan entered stealth and started exploring the corridor. He scanned around with Eye of Truth but didn't discover any monsters roaming around.

It was too dangerous to summon Lil' Gold in a place like this.

The corridor was decorated lavishly with a golden rug that stretched out far into the distance. There were crystal lamps on the walls, their flames rocking back and forth with the draft.

All the doors connecting to the corridor were tightly shut. Nie Yan approached one of them and hesitated for a moment before pushing it open.

Suddenly, a cold light flashed before Nie Yan as a dagger stabbed out toward his face.

Nie Yan hurriedly activated Gale Step to avoid the attack and retreated several steps back. A cloaked figure emerged in front of him.

It was an Evil Faction Thief! It wielded a sharp dagger in its hand, and there was a substance on the blade which flickered with a green light.

Nie Yan's heart trembled. The dagger was coated in poison!

Transcendent Insight!

Dusk Thief (Elite): Level 70

Health: 13,000/13,000

Humanoid creatures generally had low health pools. However, they were one of the most difficult monsters to deal with. Elite humanoid creatures often possessed rudimentary intelligence, making them far more dangerous than ordinary Elites.

The Dusk Thief pounced toward Nie Yan, striking at his forehead with a Concussive Blow.

Nie Yan sidestepped the attack. He retaliated with a Vital Strike, slashing the Dusk Thief's neck as he brushed past and bolted away.

Nie Yan wasn't confident he could kill the Dusk Thief even if he used all his skills. Without any skills, he would be left extremely vulnerable.

When the Dusk Thief was hit by Vital Strike, a damage value of more than 300 floated up above its head followed by a string of poison and bleed damage values ranging from 100–200.

Nie Yan kited the Dusk Thief around the corridor, slowly whittling away its health with poison and bleed damage.

Before long, the Dusk Thief fell to 2,000 health!

Nie Yan paused for a split second, leading the Dusk Thief to instantly dash forth with dagger in hand.

With Shadow Waltz, Nie Yan ducked around the Dusk Thief and then stabbed it in the back with a Lacerate and Eviscerate. Blood spurted into the air. After which he immediately ran, not daring to linger for even a second.

Chapter 366 - Thief Treasure Hoard

Nie Yan dashed away with all his might, allowing the bleed and poison damage to shave away at the Dusk Thief's health. He was no match for the enemy in a direct confrontation, but this method was also quite effective. It just took a bit more time.

The Dusk Thief eventually cornered Nie Yan into a dead-end. There was nowhere left to run.

As the Dusk Thief pounced in for the kill, Nie Yan suddenly leaped up in the air and kicked off the wall into a backflip, landing gracefully behind the opponent. He struck the Dusk Thief in the back with Assassinate and Blast.

Nie Yan's dagger lit up brilliantly, unleashing an explosion that sent the Dusk Thief crashing into the wall with a heavy thud before falling to the ground.

By the time the Dusk Thief struggled back to its feet, Nie Yan had already run far off into the distance.

Nie Yan continued kiting the Dusk Thief, slowly chipping away its health until it finally died.

A dark gray chestpiece lay glittering on the floor beside the Dusk Thief's corpse. It was a piece of equipment from the Level 70 Dark Gold-grade Ashen Punisher Set. By completing the full set its level requirement could be reduced by 10. However, pieces from this set only dropped in certain maps.

The Ashen Punisher Chestplate greatly increased Strength and allowed the player to deal an additional 120 Shadow Damage with every strike. It was best suited for Berserkers following an offensive build path.

These Dusk Thieves didn't respawn after being killed. Nie Yan wondered if he could acquire a full Ashen Punisher Set. It would be perfect for Berserkers like Smoke Stub, Edgeless, or Monochrome.

Nie Yan searched under the Dusk Thief's corpse but found nothing else. He looked around the room he had just entered. It was very cramped, lacking even basic furnishings. He exited back to the corridor and continued exploring.

The rooms in the corridor frequently had Dusk Thieves lying in ambush. Nie Yan used the same method as before to deal with them. Then he would continue exploring the rooms which usually contained one or two chests, with Silver and Gold-grade being more common and Dark Gold-grade rarer. During this time he also acquired the gauntlets and leg armour for the Ashen Punisher Set. Now he was only missing the shoulder guards, helmet, and greaves.

Nie Yan opened the door to a room with his guard raised. But to his surprise he wasn't greeted by a Dusk Thief lunging at him. The room layout was similar to the others. However, a fat middle-aged man dressed in gray robes sat at the bedside. His blonde hair was disheveled.

Nie Yan inspected him with Transcendent Insight.

Noble Ferbrazes: Level 0

Health: 200/200

"Sir Demon Hunter! Please get me out of here!" Noble Ferbrazes pleaded with a mournful expression after seeing Nie Yan.

"Here, take this Instant Transfer Scroll. You can use it to leave this place," Nie Yan said as he handed over an Instant Transfer Scroll to Noble Ferbrazes.

"Oh, Sir Demon Hunter, thank you! Thank you!" Noble Ferbrazes said gratefully.

Nie Yan was a bit fed up with NPCs constantly addressing him with his titles. However, their dialogue was tightly restricted, and title address settings couldn't be tampered with.

Noble Ferbrazes used the Instant Transfer Scroll and teleported

away.

Rescued Hostages: 1/100

Nie Yan swept his eyes around the room but found nothing interesting. Only rooms guarded by Dusk Thieves seemed to contain chests and other loot.

Nie Yan passed through one room after the other, rescuing a total of 8 hostages. After going through all the rooms in the corridor, he entered a large hall. There were rows of pillars on both sides with a red rug running down the center, leading to a magnificent throne. The hall looked empty and devoid of any people, but this only served to make him all the more wary.

Eye of Truth!

Nie Yan's pupils turned red as his eyes blossomed with a mystifying radiance. Silhouettes gradually started appearing in his vision. He counted at least 60 Dusk Thieves! A cold sweat drip fell down his forehead. There were dangers lurking everywhere in this hall! Thankfully he had used Eye of Truth; otherwise, he would've died without even knowing what killed him.

If Expert was already this difficult, Nie Yan couldn't even begin to imagine what Specialist was like. He reaffirmed his decision to take a step back was the correct choice. In the previous timeline, the vast majority of Thieves did their Great Thief class advancement quest on Easy. A few hundred Thieves passed it on Normal, a few dozen on Hard, and only one on Expert. He had forgotten that player's name, but it was rumoured they simply got lucky. Sun, King of the World, and other famous Thieves completed their class advancement quests on Hard.

Nie Yan accepting his class advancement quest on Expert was already the limit. He didn't dare to think about challenging it on Specialist. It would be tantamount to throwing his life away!

The Great Thief class advancement quest could be started at

Level 50. However, the success rate at that level was less than 1 in 2,000, so most players chose to wait until they were much stronger. Beyond this was the Shadow Dancer class advancement quest, which could be started as early as Level 100. But this was a hurdle that couldn't be brute-forced. Those who went on to become Shadow Dancers could be counted on both hands. Shadow Dancers were godly existences in the eyes of the players.

Nie Yan's level in the previous timeline was quite high at Level 180. Only two or three players surpassed Level 200 back then, and all of them were world-shaking existences who possessed godly equipment. He was firmly in the middle of the pack among top-tier players.

Nie Yan didn't know if there was anything above Shadow Dancer. But it was rumoured that after Level 200 progressing became much more difficult. Every mob gave very little experience. Even several weeks of non-stop grinding would barely fill up your experience bar by 1%. It appeared Level 200 was the soft cap.

Levelling at the later stages of the game was simply too difficult. This was why Nie Yan put in so much effort on raising Lil' Gold's level. Levelling generally became much slower for melee classes at higher levels. They would have to rely on their pets to grind effectively. Every pet that had powerful area-of-effect abilities would sell for sky-high prices. Lil' Gold's level had to keep up; otherwise, it would be too troublesome to go to low-level maps to grind weaker mobs.

Nie Yan had already planned out his own development. When the war with Bloodlust Blades came to an end, he planned to level during his free time as he travelled back and forth between the surface and Underworld every 10 days.

Too many matters required Nie Yan's attention. If he had devoted all his time to levelling, he would've already reached Level 90.

Seeing the crowd of Thieves up ahead, Nie Yan thought for a moment. He activated Disguise and transformed into one of the Dusk Thieves he killed, complete with the black garb.

Nie Yan entered stealth and started making his way towards the throne.

Nie Yan felt several dozen gazes fall on him while he was in stealth. But none of them saw through his disguise.

Nie Yan breathed a sigh of relief. He used Eye of Truth to look around as he bypassed one Dusk Thief after another. After a while, he arrived in front of the throne. It was crafted from pure gold. A Thief in dark gold leather armour patrolled around the throne.

The Thief carried two short-swords. It appeared they specialized in battle rather than assassination.

Nie Yan hid behind a pillar and inspected the Thief with Transcendent Insight.

Bloodthirsty Thief (Lord): Level 70

Health: 150,000/150,000

Expedition teams would generally avoid hunting Lord-class Thieves. They were simply too difficult to deal with. Their movement speed was very high, and they had gap closers, stuns, and other annoying abilities.

Among the Lord-class monster an expedition team might face, they would have the highest chance of wiping against Thief-types.

As for soloing a Level 70 Lord-class Thief, this was simply wishful thinking.

Even though this hall had many pillars, it wasn't possible for him to take advantage of them to kill the Bloodthirsty Thief. Crossbows were an essential item for Thieves. This wasn't an exception for NPC Thieves. If he clung on top of the pillar and shot at them, the Dusk Thieves and Bloodthirsty Thief would probably take out

crossbows to shoot at him too.

This method was out of the question.

Nie Yan had come to this hall in the previous timeline. But by then the Thieves here had already been defeated. He remembered there was an entrance to an underground dungeon behind the throne. This was probably where most of the hostages were held.

This passage was fairly well hidden. Thankfully Nie Yan was familiar with the map. Were it any other player, they wouldn't make any progress even after searching around the colosseum for multiple days.

Nie Yan looked around the hall. He discovered a large chest tucked away in a corner not far from the Bloodthirsty Thief. It wasn't a treasure chest but an ordinary one.

It was different from a treasure chest, which was unmovable, indestructible, and would disappear after being opened. It was just like a chest from reality.

This chest was made out of bamboo. Above it was a carving of three daggers.

When Nie Yan came here in the previous timeline, this chest was here too. However, it was empty, the items inside having long since been taken.

The chest wasn't locked. Nie Yan wondered what was inside.

Opening this chest without being detected by the Bloodthirsty Thief would be extremely difficult.

Nie Yan inspected the chest with Transcendent Insight.

Thief Treasure Hoard: All the money and loot the Thieves stole are in here.

Nie Yan's heart shook. In the previous timeline, everything in the hoard chest had already been taken. In this life, he was the first person to arrive here. No player had laid their hands on this chest

yet!

Chapter 367 - Animorph Necklace

Nie Yan ducked out of the Bloodthirsty Thief's vision. Getting close to the chest wasn't a problem, but snatching away the loot inside without being noticed? Now that would prove difficult.

It's impossible. Should I just give up? But that's not my style! Nie Yan mulled over this dilemma for quite some time. If I want to reach the underground prison behind the throne, I'll have to sneak past the Bloodthirsty Thief anyway. How about I try my luck with the chest on the way back?

The chest was woven from strips of bamboo. The furnishings here really were crude.

Given furniture here behaves like it does in reality... Nie Yan suddenly thought of something. The Bloodthirsty Thief is only 20 meters away. It'll definitely notice if the chest's lid is flipped open. But what if the lid isn't moved? Is there another way to loot the things inside that chest?

As Nie Yan racked his brain over the problem, the Bloodthirsty Thief sensed something and turned in his direction.

Nie Yan quickly ducked behind the pillar.

After what felt like an eternity, the Bloodthirsty Thief finally withdrew its gaze and continued patrolling near the throne.

Nie Yan broke out in a cold sweat. The Bloodthirsty Thief's perception was too frightening. He was more than 30 meters away, but they still detected his presence. He feared the Bloodthirsty Thief would close the gap in an instant if he touched the chest.

A light bulb suddenly lit up in Nie Yan's mind as his lips parted into a delighted smile. He equipped the Pygmy Ring and activated Pygmy Transformation. His body rapidly shrunk to a third of its original size as everything in his surroundings appeared much larger, including the Bloodthirsty Thief.

Nie Yan who was still in stealth looked just like a small child. He started making his way to the chest.

The bamboo wicker chest appeared enormous to the pygmy-sized Nie Yan. He just happened to be the same height as the chest.

After transforming into a pygmy, Nie Yan's cloaking ability far surpassed normal, making him extremely difficult to detect. He went completely unnoticed while making his way from the pillar to the chest.

Nie Yan arrived in front of the chest. It was placed in the corner but not directly against the wall, leaving a one-meter gap.

Nie Yan squeezed into the gap behind the chest, where he was completely hidden from view thanks to his shrunk stature.

There were also advantages to being small!

Nie Yan recalled an interesting anecdote related to the Pygmy Ring. The goblin Mages from the Demon Tribe in the Underworld highly prized this item. It allowed them to shrink down from their already diminutive size, about one-third that of an ordinary player, to only eight inches. They would scurry around the battlefield, bombarding the enemy frontline with magic. Since they were so small, it was nearly impossible to catch them. This was the most shameless and unrivalled tactic of the goblins.

As for what other clever uses the Pygmy Ring had, this required further investigation.

Many special items in Conviction were shrouded in a cloud of mystery. Only someone with a rich imagination could hope of putting them to full use.

The Bloodthirsty Thief gazed at the chest for a moment before turning away.

Nie Yan noticed that the Bloodthirsty Thief would look this way every 3 minutes. It was crucial that he didn't make any movements during this time, lest he be caught.

Nie Yan tried pushing the box. It was quite heavy, indicating there were many items stored inside.

Nie Yan sat down in the nook behind the chest. No one could see him. He took out Zennarde's Sword and started making an incision into the chest.

Things like furniture could be altered and damaged!

Zennarde's Sword easily cut through the bamboo, reaching a layer of wood. Of course the wood offered little to no resistance, and was cut through just the same. This was when he reached a layer of dark steel.

Another layer! This chest is thick! Nie Yan puckered his lips. He was fooled by the outer appearance of the chest!

He wondered if Zennarde's Sword could cut through steel. It was a godly weapon, after all.

Nie Yan tried making a cut in the steel but only left behind a small nick roughly half a centimeter in size.

Even though it was only a tiny bit, Nie Yan confirmed he could cut through the metal layer of the chest!

For the first time Nie Yan felt like an actual thief as he tried looting treasure!

Once three minutes passed, Nie Yan stopped what he was doing and held his breath.

The Bloodthirsty Thief looked over at the chest, which appeared completely fine. It couldn't see the damaged parts of the chest, nor Nie Yan who was hiding behind the chest.

After a while, the Bloodthirsty Thief looked elsewhere.

Nie Yan relaxed his breathing and continued his work. He completely cut away the bamboo wickerwork and wood, leaving the shavings on the ground beside him. All that remained between him and the loot inside the chest was the layer of steel. He used

Zennarde's Sword to start nicking away.

Metal was pretty hard, so Nie Yan was having some trouble cutting through it. However, he was still cutting away tiny metal shavings with Zennarde's Sword.

Nie Yan dropped what he was doing every three minutes. After six minutes, he finally opened up a hole, where a single gold coin tumbled out. In the instant it hit the ground and made a light ding, he quickly grabbed it in his hand.

However, the sound still rang out.

When the Bloodthirsty Thief heard the sound, it immediately started walking over towards the chest.

Nie Yan who was hidden behind the chest felt his nerves stretched taut. If he was discovered by the Bloodthirsty Thief, he would lose the opportunity to loot the chest. His only choice would be to escape with an Unknown Transfer Scroll!

Unless absolutely necessary Nie Yan refused to leave! He curled up his body, trying to make it as small as possible.

The Bloodthirsty Thief gradually approached, stopping at six meters away from the chest. It carefully examined the area around the chest.

Nie Yan could feel the Bloodthirsty Thief's sharp gaze sweep over him. He forcefully calmed himself and held his breath.

The Bloodthirsty Thief stood there for a long time. The chest completely blocked Nie Yan from view.

With the Bloodthirsty Thief's rudimentary intelligence, it probably recognized no normal person could fit in the gap behind the chest.

After failing to discover anything, the Bloodthirsty Thief turned around and returned to a passive state.

Sensing the Bloodthirsty Thief's footsteps getting farther and

farther away, Nie Yan breathed a sigh of relief. His stretched taut nerves started relaxing. He continued using Zennarde's Sword to expand the hole in the chest as one gold coin after another tumbled out and fell into his bag.

One gold coin, two gold coins...

Gold coins flowed out of the chest like a mountain spring directly into Nie Yan's bag.

Before long, Nie Yan finally opened up a hole about two inches in diameter, allowing him to reach inside with his hand. He started fishing around the chest for items. At first it was only gold, handful after handful being stuffed in his bag.

Nie Yan obtained more than 3,000 gold from the chest. As he fished around some more, he felt a round object that appeared to be a jewel.

He took the object out to examine it. It was indeed a sparkling jewel.

It emitted a golden radiance and was slightly translucent.

It was a Radiant Gemstone!

Nie Yan's hand trembled. A normal gem wouldn't warrant such an intense reaction! He had experienced many things in Conviction, with hundreds of thousands of gold passing through his hands. However, this Radiant Gemstone made him feel incredibly excited.

This item was pretty common at Level 70–80, selling for around several thousand gold. But right now it didn't exist in the marketplace! Even if someone offered 20,000 gold, he still wouldn't be willing to sell it!

Nie Yan wondered if there were more of them in the chest. He continued feeling around, fishing out one item after another until he had completely emptied one corner of the chest.

Nie Yan made the hole in the chest big enough for him to fit through. Once he was inside, he didn't hesitate to loot everything there. He obtained a total of 7,000 gold, 5 Radiant Gemstones, and a necklace.

Looking at the Necklace's properties, Nie Yan's heart trembled. It was another special item!

Animorph Necklace (Dark Gold): Special Item

Description: Transform into a selected animal and gain additional stats and abilities for 5 minutes. You are unable to attack while transformed. Getting attacked will break the transformation. Cooldown: 1 day.

For example, a cheetah would grant additional Dexterity, a bear would grant additional Strength, and a seagull would grant the ability to fly.

Nie Yan thought for a moment and selected a lynx which would increase his jumping ability.

Nie Yan chose a lynx because it was relatively small, agile, and good at evading danger. His jumping ability would be increased by 300%, meaning he could cover a distance of nine meters in a single leap and jump as high as five meters in the air.

This kind of item had a large variety of uses. But very few people could use them to their utmost potential.

Nie Yan recalled Tang Yao had a similar item. However, the animal he selected was a seagull. Since the chosen animal was different, the function was naturally different too.

After selecting the lynx, Nie Yan checked the necklace's stats again.

Animorph Necklace (Dark Gold): Special Item

Description: Transform into a lynx and receive Dexterity +300% and Jump +300% for 5 minutes. You are unable to attack while

transformed. Getting attacked will break the transformation.
Cooldown: 1 day.

Restriction: Nirvana Flame.

Note: This item cannot be traded.

Chapter 368 - Underground Dungeon

Nie Yan's assortment of special items could practically fill a museum exhibit by this point. These accessories didn't need to be worn all the time, so he could just leave them in his bag until he needed them. He certainly wasn't short on inventory space!

Radiant Gems were special materials used to craft or upgrade special items. Some of Nie Yan's special items were due for an upgrade, but he would first need to find a suitable Jewelfrafter.

After quietly looting everything in the chest, Nie Yan snuck out of the hole and proceeded toward the throne.

Pygmy Transformation lasted an hour. He still had ample time.

He stuck close to the wall while slowly making his way towards the throne.

When Nie Yan saw the Bloodthirsty Thief walking over in his direction, he immediately halted his footsteps and ducked into a corner, not daring to make even the slightest movement. The Bloodthirsty Thief swept through the surroundings with an ominous gaze, then turned around and walked further and further away.

Seeing the receding figure of the Bloodthirsty Thief, Nie Yan took advantage of the opportunity to rush to the back of the throne. There he saw a hole with a staircase leading downwards.

Descending down the stairs a damp coldness suffused the air along with the foul stench of blood.

The dungeon was dark and gloomy.

You have discovered the Underground Dungeon.

The floor of the dungeon was a mess with hay bails scattered about. A narrow passageway ran down the center, surrounded on both sides by rows of prison cells. Guarding them were Evil

Hounds, Level 70 Elites that could spit out Soul Fire.

Every cell was filled with commoners and nobles. Their clothing albeit dirty and unkempt was made out of high-quality materials.

Saving all the hostages via the normal method—taking down the Evil Hounds one by one while coping with their Soul Fire—would take a minimal of 12 hours to upwards of several days. But none of that was necessary with Pygmy Transformation still active.

Nie Yan easily snuck into one of the prison cells by slipping through a gap between the bars. He saw a commoner in tattered clothes anxiously pacing back and forth. He tossed an Instant Transfer Scroll onto the floor.

When the commoner happened to look down during a sad sigh, he noticed the Instant Transfer Scroll beside his feet. A joyous expression appeared on his face. He cautiously surveyed his surroundings but saw no one around. He activated the scroll and teleported to safety with a flash of light.

Nie Yan took advantage of his small size to slip past the Evil Hounds and deliver Instant Transfer Scrolls to every cell.

The hostages quickly teleported away after receiving an Instant Transfer Scroll.

A while later Nie Yan checked his quest progress.

Rescued Hostages: 56/100

Nie Yan was steadily approaching his goal. His movements were light and agile as he bypassed the Evil Hounds undetected. With their low intelligence, they had no idea how the hostages in the prisons cells were mysteriously disappearing.

Saving one person after another, Nie Yan finally reached the end of the dungeon. His quest progress was at 99 out of 100 hostages rescued, missing only a single person. However, he couldn't find them even after scouring the entire place.

After searching around some more, he eventually discovered a damp tunnel with a staircase which led deeper underground.

Just when he was about to descend the stairs, his body started growing until he returned to his original size.

The hour is up. Nothing I can do except continue exploring... Nie Yan gradually proceeded deeper into the narrow tunnel, with nothing in his vision save for darkness and mud walls.

He had no idea where this tunnel led to.

Nie Yan thought back to the Ashen Punisher Set. He believed the only way to obtain the remaining three pieces was by clearing out all the Dusk Thieves in the throne room. But it was impossible for him to accomplish this by himself.

An expedition team composed of Bladelight and his team would have no problem clearing out those Dusk Thieves. It would prove troublesome to deal with the Dusk Thieves using conventional tactics, but Nie Yan had thought of a suitable plan. By using a combination of vines and ice walls to guard the entrance of the throne room, they could freely bombard the enemy with area-of-effect spells.

Asskickers United currently had 17 Mages capable of casting Advanced Magic. Nuking these Dusk Thieves to oblivion would be easy. As for the likely sole survivor, the Bloodthirsty Thief patrolling around the throne, he would figure out a way to deal with it when the time came.

Given the gear quality of Bladelight and the others, Nie Yan was confident they could handle a Level 70 Lord.

Generally, a Fighter with average gear could tank an equal-level Lord, a Fighter with somewhat decent gear could tank a Lord up to 10 levels above them, and a Fighter with top-quality gear could tank a Lord as much as 30 levels above them. This was why outstanding expedition teams could regularly hunt down much

higher level Lords. Furthermore, all the top Priests in Asskickers United could cast Junior Revive, and three of their Paladins had learned Protect, a skill which allowed the Priests to leave the combat zone without attracting any aggro. Like this they could avoid wipes. Of course they would still suffer some losses.

Nie Yan passed down his coordinates to Guo Huai. Bladelight and the others were currently hunting a different Lord, so they would come over a little later.

The players of Asskickers United were still too weak. When they were a bit higher level, Nie Yan planned to take them to hunt a Level 100 Lord.

「How's your class advancement quest going?」Guo Huai asked. He knew beforehand Nie Yan had chosen to do his class advancement on Expert. He couldn't help but admire the courage Nie Yan displayed. Most players didn't even dare to do their class advancement on Normal, let alone Hard or Expert.

「I'm one hostage away from finishing it,」Nie Yan replied.

「Already?」Guo Huai blurted out in surprise. Most players took at least several days to complete their class advancement quest.

In fact, Nie Yan's class advancement quest would take other players more than two weeks to finish, if not longer. Finding the hidden entrance behind the throne alone was already difficult, requiring players to blindly search around the Nilan Colosseum for at least 5 days.

「Mhmm. Has there been any movements on the side of Bloodlust Blades?」Nie Yan asked.

「I heard the Century Financial Group handed over another 700,000 gold to them, so they've started paying out compensation to their players too. They also made an announcement saying if we were willing to admit defeat, they would let bygones be bygones.」Guo Huai chuckled.「Although I do believe the Century Financial

Group gave them some gold, I don't think it's anywhere near that much. I refuse to believe the Century Financial Group has 700,000 gold just lying around!」

「They definitely won't last much longer. Reply on the forums saying as long as Bloodlust Blades stands, Asskickers United will never take down the bounty on them!」Nie Yan said. Bloodlust Blades was already running on fumes. This was the perfect opportunity to take them down; otherwise, they would cause endless trouble in the future after fully recovering from this war.

「You sure are ruthless!」Guo Huai remarked「I bet the players from Bloodlust Blades will despair after seeing this announcement, and any remaining thoughts of staying in the guild will vanish. It'll be Bloodlust Blade's largest mass exodus of players to date!」

「Be careful of Bloodlust Blades making a final desperate attempt at a reversal. Pay attention to their every movement. If they come to Calore, immediately report back to me. After all, we need to show our guests some proper hospitality!」Nie Yan's lips curved into a faint smile. If an intercity war broke out, Bloodlust Blades would be at a huge disadvantage. Asskickers United's position in Calore was unshakable. Even if they encountered trouble, they still had Holy Empire, Sapphire Shrine, Radiant Sacred Flame, War God Tribe, and Battle Crazy Alliance to back them up!

「Understood!」Guai nodded. He wasn't worried at all about Bloodlust Blades coming to Calore.

Nie Yan continued chatting with Guo Huai for a bit before hanging up.

Guo Huai posted up Nie Yan's announcement on the forums.

「As long as Bloodlust Blades stands, Asskickers United will never take the bounty down!」

All the players on the forums sucked in a breath of cold air. Asskickers United had basically cut off all paths of retreat. How

ruthless! Everyone could sense the absolute confidence in these words. Could Bloodlust Blades withstand this fierce counter from Asskickers United?

At this time, everybody was reminded of Bloodlust Mad Blade's words: Whoever backed down first was the other's grandson!

Bloodlust Blades was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Were they really going to continue competing with Asskickers United? The number of players hunting them had recently increased dramatically. Over 6,000 players had died in just 2 days. This was a huge blow to the moral. At this rate, more and more people would withdraw from the guild. Add Nie Yan's announcement to the mix, and their situation was becoming exceedingly grave.

Nie Yan felt relaxed. After the guild's funding issue was resolved, they no longer had to worry about paying out the rewards for the bounty. He had the free time to complete several quests. In a few days, he would return to the Underworld. The profits from the second round of trades with Fallen Angel would completely transform Asskickers United!

As he traversed the dark tunnels, Nie Yan began noticing a distant rhythm that seemed like breathing. Waves of searing-hot wind flowed through the tunnel in sync with the rhythm, bringing wisps of white steam out of the depths.

As this heatwave brushed over Nie Yan's skin, he felt a scalding heat. Thankfully he had the Kilnfire Heart which greatly increased his Fire Resistance and could even make him immune to fire damage for a certain time.

Chapter 369 - Last Hostage

When Nie Yan passed through the fog, he saw a giant hound in the distance. It was as large as a grizzly bear with thick black fur. Its scarlet-red tongue radiated an intense heat.

It was a creature capable of using flames!

The hound paced back and forth in the cave restlessly. A thick and solid chain was tied to its neck with the other end spiked deep into a large boulder. Its range of movement was extremely limited, but it still had a ranged attack that was deadly to players. It would spit out flames at any intruder that entered its line-of-sight.

Nie Yan gradually approached until he was roughly 30 meters away from the hound and inspected it with Transcendent Insight.

Black Flame Hound (Lord): Level 70

Health: 320,000/320,000

Another Level 70 Lord, and this one had 320,000 health. With this Black Flame Hound guarding the only path forward, there was no way Nie Yan could pass, nor could he see an end to this cave.

Given Nie Yan's current strength, it was impossible for him to kill the Black Flame Hound. He estimated the chain around its neck was roughly 12 meters long.

The only option was to make a run for it! Too bad this was easier said than done.

Nie Yan gradually approached, inching ever closer to the Black Flame Hound. At around 20 meters away the Black Flame Hound noticed him. It belched out scorching hot flames in his direction.

The flames were fierce and oppressive.

Nie Yan activated God's Blessing and braved the attack head-on.

The flames surged toward Nie Yan like a raging torrent but quickly dissipated upon making contact with the thin membrane

surrounding him and produced a sound that resembled the crackling of firecrackers. He was completely unharmed! God's Blessing granted immunity to all magic!

The flames were so bright Nie Yan couldn't open his eyes.

At this moment, the Black Flame Hound pounced into the air and swiped down at Nie Yan, wanting to tear him to shreds.

Just as the Black Flame Hound's claws came down on him, Nie Yan activated Gale Step. A loud klang rang out as he took advantage of the first three seconds of invincibility to avoid taking damage.

Nie Yan slid under the Black Flame Hound's legs, nearly being squashed in the process, and came out the other side. Crushing a Haste Scroll and activating Swift Retreat, he sprinted away with all his might.

The Black Flame Hound's claws missed and struck the cave floor, blasting mud and debris into the air. It swung around and leaped after Nie Yan.

Nie Yan was no match for the Black Flame Hound in terms of speed. It quickly caught up to him from behind and ruthlessly swiped down on his back.

Shadow Waltz!

「Klang!」Taking advantage of the initial two seconds of invincibility from the enhanced Shadow Waltz, Nie Yan blocked the Black Flame Hound's attack yet again. The powerful blow still blew him away like a ragdoll.

Nie Yan pivoted his body mid-air and planted his right hand on the ground, causing him to flip over and land back onto his feet.

Before Nie Yan could do anything else, the Black Flame Hound had already caught up behind him. He didn't dare to linger even for a millisecond and fled for his dear life.

With both Gale Step and Shadow Waltz on cooldown, he had nothing left to block the Black Flame Hound's next attack.

The Black Flame Hound was several times faster than him. Its attacks couldn't be dodged with just a simple sidestep or roll.

A single attack from the Black Flame Hound would probably kill him.

Nie Yan was already at the limit of how fast he could go. He constantly changed directions and ran in a zig-zag pattern to avoid the Black Flame Hound's attacks. It would only be delayed for a slight moment before quickly catching up to him again.

When the Black Flame Hound was about to pounce directly on top of Nie Yan, he shot out a web line at a stalactite five meters away and swung away to safety.

The Black Flame Hound still refused to let Nie Yan go. Its sharp claws were only a few inches from his back.

Nie Yan flew for more than 10 meters before letting go of the web line and landing back on his feet.

The Black Flame Hound caught back up in a flash and swiped down at Nie Yan, who looked dazed and caught off-guard.

Just when Nie Yan's death seemed imminent, the chain around the Black Flame Hound's neck tightened and fiercely jerked it back.

The Black Flame Hound tried to pounce on Nie Yan again, but it was once again jerked back by the chain. No matter how hard it tried, it couldn't reach him.

The chain had already been pulled to its maximum length. The Black Flame Hound indignantly blasted Nie Yan with flames to no avail. God's Blessing was still active.

Nie Yan's lips parted into a faint smirk. Sure enough he had correctly guessed the length of the chain. Despite nearly losing his

life on several occasions, he was happy he made it through this harrowing experience without any mishap.

He quickly turned and left the Black Flame Hound behind as he hurried forward. Only after moving more than 50 meters away from the Black Flame Hound did he finally feel safe enough to slow his steps.

Nie Yan looked back and saw the Black Flame Hound standing there panting away non-stop, occasionally breathing out flames in his direction.

After getting past the Black Flame Hound, Nie Yan continued travelling through the winding and twisting tunnels of the cave. He advanced several hundred meters before encountering a prison cell up ahead. It was very small, only covering an area of three by three meters. The cell door was crafted out of a peculiar dark golden metal which exuded rich magical energy and was sealed shut by a giant metal lock.

This prison cell looked extremely secure.

Nie Yan gazed through the bars and spotted a slim old man bound up inside. He was reclined on the wall with both his wrists and ankles tied up in shackles. He could only slightly hobble around in the cell.

The old man's robes were starting to become faded, but he still had a healthy appearance. He wasn't all that tall, but his body brimmed with explosive power.

Nie Yan's brows raised in rejoice. It was the last hostage!

He inspected the old man with Transcendent Insight.

Pallot (Lord): Level 70

Titles: Thief Association Elder, Marquis

This old man's background wasn't shallow! He was actually an Elder of the Thief Association and a Marquis! Thinking about the

journey here, he truly wasn't an easy person to find!

Nie Yan examined the cell door. Each bar was engraved with tiny runes that could be easily overlooked if one wasn't paying close attention to them.

Chapter 370 - Truth Revealed

Pallot finally took notice of Nie Yan who stood outside the cell and turned his gaze toward him.

“Sir Pallot, hello. I’m here to rescue you,” Nie Yan greeted. 「Klang! Klang! Klang!」He attempted to break the bars of the cell door with Zennarde’s Sword, but he couldn’t leave so much as a scratch.

Nie Yan was startled. It seemed cutting off these bars was impossible.

He tried other methods like tossing an Instant Transfer Scroll to Pallot, but discovered the runes engraved on the bars prevented the scroll from passing through.

“Greetings, Demon Hunter. That won’t work, the cell is guarded by magic. The only way to open it is by retrieving the key from the Black Flame Hound’s body,” Pallot said with a sigh.

I’ll have to kill the Black Flame Hound to get the key? Nie Yan felt a headache coming on. Unless he had some sort of special method, he was nowhere near a match for the Black Flame Hound. After all, it was a Level 70 Lord!

Nie Yan couldn’t possibly kill the Black Flame Hound in such a cramped space!

He shifted his attention back to the cell door. Guarded by magic? It’s probably some sort of magic circle! I wonder if there’s a method to bypass it?

Looking at the time, there were still 20 minutes remaining before server shutdown. Nie Yan pondered for a moment. He would search through the official website to see if there was any information on breaking magic circles, then come up with a plan for tomorrow.

“Sir Pallot, I’ll return later. I’ll try to think of a way to free you.”

“Alright. Thank you, Demon Hunter. I pray for your safe return.”

Nie Yan could tell Pallot was a figure of high status. The difficulty of this class advancement quest was a bit high. He wondered what sort of reward he would receive for saving Pallot and completing the quest.

Nie Yan put down his gaming helmet. After taking a shower and eating breakfast, he headed off for school.

Even though it was already 8:00 a.m., the morning mist had yet to dissipate due to him living by the lake side. The air was fresh and clean. A blanket of white hung just above the lake as the morning sun refracted beautifully off the water’s surface.

Cars drove past his villa every now and then.

Nie Yan drove for 20 minutes to pick up Xie Yao. Her property was a two-storey villa enclosed by a metal fence. Inside was a lush garden with a variety of blossoming flowers vying for attention within the morning mist. It was a scenic view. A bending stone path led from the house to the road.

Nie Yan stepped out of his car. Taking a glance at the villa in the distance, he walked up to the entrance gate and rang on the intercom.

Before long, Xie Yao’s face appeared on the display. She wore a pink sleeveless nightgown that exposed her delicate shoulders and pajama shorts which showed off her long and slender thighs. She was currently in the middle of brushing her teeth, with bits of foam from toothpaste covering her lips.

「Nie Yan! Wait a moment, I’ll be right down! Just a second!」Xie Yao said, a little flustered.

Nie Yan chuckled. This was his first time seeing Xie Yao so unkempt. It seemed she had just woken up.

A warm feeling surfaced in Nie Yan’s heart. After going through

so many hardships in his past life, he had finally achieved a bit of happiness in this one.

After waiting for a while, he saw Xie Yao in a blue tracksuit rushing out to meet him. She looked youthful and energetic.

Xie Yao's tight tracksuit perfectly accentuated her curves. Nie Yan couldn't help but recall the recent incident where they both got drunk, his hands grabbing every inch of her soft and supple body. Simultaneously, he was also reminded of that unforgettable night with Yao Yao in the underground chamber. Her beautiful and flawless figure was like a strong spirit. A light sip and he was already intoxicated.

"How come I've never seen your parents?" Nie Yan asked. Ever since he started picking Xie Yao up, he had never once seen her parents.

"They're out travelling," Xie Yao pouted, a hint of discontent on her face.

Nie Yan found her pouting expression extremely cute. "C'mon, let's go. I heard we're getting our academic test results back today," he said with a smile as he stepped back into the car.

"Mhm." Xie Yao opened the front door on the passenger side and got in.

The car zoomed away down the street.

The two soon arrived at school. Nie Yan parked the car in the parking lot, and they both got out and walked through campus, hand in hand.

The sight immediately attracted the attention of their fellow students. Regardless of whether it was Nie Yan or Xie Yao, both were well-known in the school. The two of them walking together would naturally raise some eyebrows. Sensing these odd gazes, Xie Yao whispered in Nie Yan's ear, "Can we walk a bit faster?" She still wasn't fully used to this feeling. Her walking together with

Nie Yan would inevitably arouse questions of their relationship.

At this moment, a female student walked up to them. Dressed casually she had a beautiful appearance with long flowing hair.

Seeing this girl come over, Xie Yao immediately felt her face burn up. She wanted to find somewhere to hide.

The girl looked at Xie Yao with a teasing smile before turning to Nie Yan and sizing him up. “Yao Yao, is this your boyfriend?”

Nie Yan was a bit dazed. Even though he clearly knew Yao Yao was a nickname, he almost misheard it as the Yao Yao from Conviction. The Yáo in Xie Yao was pronounced with the second tone in Mandarin, while the Yǎo in Yao Yao was pronounced with the third.

“Hello, I’m Nie Yan,” Nie Yan greeted.

“Nirvana Flame...?” the girl asked in surprise, then glanced at Xie Yao.

“No! He’s Nie Yan, the Nie written with a ‘pair’ (双) and ‘ear’ (耳), and the Yan (言) in ‘language’ (語言),” Xie Yao explained in a fluster. Her mind was a bit chaotic. She wouldn’t know what to do if Nie Yan found out she was Yao Yao in-game.

“Oh, so it’s like that? Nice to meet you. I’m Tang Yue.” Tang Yue held out her hand for a handshake. Her smile was like a cool spring breeze.

Nie Yan shook Tang Yue’s hand. Her name was somewhat familiar to him. He recalled someone saying Moon Child’s real name was Tang Yue. Glancing at the slightly nervous and embarrassed Xie Yao beside him, he finally confirmed she was indeed Yao Yao with almost absolute certainty. He also figured she was the person behind the Dragonsoar Financial Group investing in Asskickers United.

Nie Yan’s mind turned chaotic. All of sudden many little clues in his past life started connecting together.

Shortly after graduating high school and parting ways with Xie Yao, he had met Yao Yao through Xia Ling's friends inside Conviction. He felt a strange bond and sense of closeness to her from the start. She must have already known his real identity back then but still chose to keep it a secret, silently accompanying him for the better half of a decade. Thinking about this, he wanted to ruthlessly slap himself in the face for not realizing the woman of his dreams was right beside him all along.

Back then, he refused to commit to a relationship with Yao Yao. After the incident in the secret chamber beneath Fenarte, he treated her coldly and distanced himself from her. It was him who wounded her heart and pushed her away.

Yao Yao had shown the utmost concern for him, still keeping him company even during the lowest point of his life. It was a pity that at that time his heart belonged only to Xie Yao.

Nie Yan was wracked with shame and guilt. Just how many mistakes did he commit in his past life? One after another, there were simply too many to count!

He took a deep breath, then gazed at the beautiful Xie Yao to his side. She was as pure as a snow lotus. He vowed to never wrong her again!

Tang Yue and Xie Yao happily chatted while Nie Yan followed closely behind. The three entered the classroom together.

Tang Yue turned to Nie Yan and smiled. "Yao Yao and I are going to chat some more. I hope you don't mind me butting in on your time together?"

"It's fine, you two keep chatting. I'll go look for Zhai Hao and the others," Nie Yan replied with a smile.

Zhai Hao and 10 other students were chatting at the back of the classroom. There were also some students from other classes mixed in. Nie Yan recalled Zhai Hao didn't have that many friends

outside of their class in his past life.

Seeing Nie Yan walk over, Zhai Hao immediately walked up and greeted him with a wide grin. “People saw you walking together with the class goddess this morning. Not bad, bro! You only transferred here recently, and you’ve already made such a big catch!” His voice carried a hint of admiration.

Nie Yan chuckled. “Let’s not talk about me. How are things going with you and Xia Ling? Made any progress?”

Zhai Hao immediately became reserved. “Eh, you know. It’s going...” He was the same as ever. This fellow was normally carefree and chatty. But the moment Xia Ling was mentioned he would become as timid as a mouse. Nie Yan couldn’t help but recall the time they spent together in his past life both in and outside of the game. Even though Zhai Hao was a bit reckless, he was a loyal friend.

Thanks to Nie Yan’s influence, Zhai Hao had also shown some improvement in this life. It was rumoured his academic test results weren’t bad. Other universities also paid attention to the Top Military Academy’s entrance exams. As long as a student scored decently, even if they failed to get into the Top Military Academy, they would immediately be accepted by other famous universities.

Nie Yan didn’t know what university Zhai Hao wanted to enter, but his chances of getting in were probably better this time around.

There was a large group of students behind Zhai Hao. Seeing Nie Yan come over, all of their attention focused on him.

Nie Yan was the man of the hour. Everybody wanted to get to know him. Many of these people previously couldn’t give a rat’s ass about Zhai Hao. But after hearing he was friends with Nie Yan, all of them gathered together to befriend him.

Zhai Hao gave Nie Yan a helpless smile. Nie Yan instantly

understood the situation. There was no lack of people with influential backgrounds in a prestigious school like this.

Nie Yan knew exactly how to handle these types of people. He didn't have the slightest intention of getting too friendly with any of them.

Chapter 371 - Romantic Invitation

“Zhai Hao. He’s your friend, right? Why don’t you introduce us?” a short-haired male student asked. Obviously he knew who Nie Yan was. He only pretended not to know to get things rolling.

“I’d like you all to meet Nie Yan. He’s a good friend of mine,” Zhai Hao introduced Nie Yan with a bright smile, then pointed at the male student. “This is Liu Wei from Class 5, the son of the head of the Tianhua Enterprise. He also passed the fitness portion of the Top Military Academy’s exam. Now he’s waiting for the results of the academic portion.”

“The academic portion is nothing.” Liu Wei waved his hand with a confident smile on his face. “We should all stay in touch once we graduate.”

“Certainly.” Nie Yan nodded in agreement. He could tell six people in the group were part of Liu Wei’s clique. The rest were acquaintances of Zhai Hao.

Seeing Nie Yan’s courteous and approachable attitude, Liu Wei’s expression softened. His old man had instructed him to do his utmost to befriend Nie Yan, or at the very least never antagonize him. Anyone could see Nie Yan’s potential. Not to mention Father Nie, whose financial capital made even them feel wary, was also a force to be reckoned. With their current rise, the Nie Family was set to become the next powerful financial group. It was crucial to build good relations with them early on.

Zhai Hao introduced the people in the group one by one. Nie Yan only casually listened, memorizing their names without much effort.

These students felt Nie Yan wasn’t overbearing at all but rather quite easy-going and approachable. He was a million times more likeable than that fellow Liu Rui.

Nie Yan had lived through two lives, having experienced a myriad of situations. Giving a favourable impression to these kids couldn't be simpler. He was at the same time well aware that anyone capable of entering Huahai High had at least some background. There was no harm in being on friendly terms with everyone. Earning people's ire would only incite plotting and scheming that was difficult to defend against.

As everyone chatted the topic eventually shifted to Conviction.

“Speaking of Conviction, Liu Wei is the strongest of our group at Level 51. He's the top player in Burning Heaven, and one of the top 1,500 players in the Viridian Empire,” someone called Ge Baiyu said as he glanced at Liu Wei. He was a member of Liu Wei's squad. Naturally he had to give his leader some face.

Liu Wei felt pleased with himself after having his ego stroked. “It's nothing really. After the buried history expansion patch, levelling became much easier. Players over Level 50 are a dime a dozen.”

“No need to be so modest. Given how many players there are in the Viridian Empire, getting into the top 1,500 is amazing! It's not something that can be achieved through luck alone!” another one of Liu Wei's lackeys chimed in.

“Since there aren't any guild activities scheduled today, I've got some time to kill. How about I take you guys levelling with me? I recently obtained three new area-of-effect spells, so it'll be a breeze.” Liu Wei turned to Nie Yan and Zhai Hao. “Why don't you two join us as well? I don't mind helping you raise your levels, no strings attached of course.”

Liu Wei was implying he would take care of everyone.

Nie Yan and Zhai Hao had helpless smiles on their faces.

Zhai Hao couldn't help but laugh to himself. This fellow actually wanted to help the Mad Rogue level. Could his area-of-effect spells

match Lil' Gold's?

Burning Heaven was a small guild in Calore with only 10,000 or so players. Their average level was pretty low too. Compared to Asskickers United, they were a speck of dust on a country road.

Nie Yan politely declined, "I'd love to but I probably can't make it since there's a guild expedition coming up."

"Ah, what guild do you guys belong to?" Liu Wei asked. Lost in his complacency, he had completely forgotten to ask Nie Yan and Zhai Hao's levels. He had never met anyone in Huahui High above him in level. Everyone he knew just followed his heed.

"I'm from Warriors United," Zhai Hao replied on their behalf. He knew Nie Yan didn't want to reveal his identity. "I'm busy as well. A friend promised to take Xia Ling and me levelling."

Hearing this, a hint of jealousy surfaced on Liu Wei's face. He really couldn't understand how a numbskull like Zhai Hao managed to snag a beautiful girl like Xia Ling. It was simply sticking a bouquet of flowers in a pile of manure. He somewhat looked down on Zhai Hao, but he naturally wouldn't show it.

"Zhai Hao, why don't you bring Xia Ling and your friend along with us? The levelling will be quick, so one or two more people won't make much of a difference," Ge Baiyu said with a smile before secretly stealing a glance at Liu Wei. He knew Liu Wei wanted to flaunt his skills in front of a pretty girl like Xia Ling.

Zhai Hao shook his head. "It's fine. Maybe some other time. The class goddess doesn't like levelling with other people."

"Class goddess...?"

"Xie Yao?" Liu Wei's face lit up. Xie Yao was one of the girls in Class 3 he secretly lusted after. She was hands down the goddess of Class 3, and maybe even the prettiest girl in the entire school. Another was Jiang Yingyu. Her figure was simply stunning! Her lovely dancing filled men with lust and desire and made their

hearts palpitate. Who knew how many male students fantasized about Jiang Yanyu in their dreams. The last was Xia Ling, who was pretty in her own right, only somewhat paling in comparison to Xie Yao and Jiang Yingyu.

“Why not invite Xie Yao along as well?” Ge Baiyu suggested. “The more the merrier, am I right?”

From their point of view, Xie Yao couldn't possibly be high level since she was a girl.

Zhai Hao glanced at Nie Yan and noticed his expression remained unmoved.

“I don't think the class goddess will agree. Let's just forget about it,” Zhai Hao said. These people were a real riot. Them taking the class goddess levelling? More like the other way around!

“Isn't she a bit too full of herself?”

“Yeah! What's so wrong with everybody happily levelling together? There's no need to be so stubborn,” several of Liu Wei's lackeys added in one after another. However, they didn't dare speak too rudely. They couldn't afford to offend someone of Xie Yao's status.

“It's fine if they don't want to come. We're inviting you with sincerity. Forget it. Let's talk about something else.” Liu Wei acted as mediator, though he was inwardly a bit peeved.

Just at this moment, a female student walked over to them. Seeing her appearance, their hearts trembled as they held their breaths.

The female student was Jiang Yingyu. She wore a dancer's silk skirt, her slender and supple waist swaying seductively as she walked. Her chest was abundant and plentiful like a rich harvest. Everyone's attention instantly focused on her, their hormones running wild.

“Nie Yan, we meet again,” Jiang Yingyu greeted. Her soft and

melodic voice appeared to make Liu Wei and his group go limp.

Everyone gazed at Nie Yan with jealousy in their eyes, asking why they couldn't be the one Jiang Yingyu greeted instead.

"Hello, it's rare to see you in school," Nie Yan calmly greeted back. He and Jiang Yingyu were merely nodding acquaintances.

Jiang Yingyu's brows slightly furrowed at Nie Yan's distant attitude.

Nie Yan was undoubtedly the most outstanding person not just in the class but the entire school. He could potentially become the third student in the school's history to enter the Top Military Academy as an Ace. His fitness results met the mark. Now everyone was waiting for his academic results to be revealed.

Jiang Yingyu knew Nie Yan only had eyes for Xie Yao. But considering they had only known each other for a little less than a month, she refused to believe she didn't have a chance. She and Xie Yao always competed in secret.

"I passed the Top Military Academy's entrance exams too, so we'll be seeing a lot more of each other in the future. Maybe we should get to know each other better some time?" Jiang Yingyu asked.

Only now did Nie Yan recall that Jiang Yingyu had barely failed to get into the Top Military Academy in the previous timeline. But thanks to his outstanding performance in this life, the dean of the academy had increased the quota of students that would be accepted from Huahui High, with a focus on those who majored in the arts.

Huahai High's university acceptance rates were renowned. This year's batch of students was especially remarkable.

"Of course," Nie Yan politely replied.

"Here's a ticket for the Huahai Theatre. I'll be doing a show there this afternoon. So, classmate Nie, will you do me the honour of

watching my performance?” Jiang Yingyu asked.

Everyone gulped at Jiang Yingyu’s charming smile.

This was a romantic invitation!

“This afternoon...” Nie Yan hesitated as he glanced at Xie Yao at the front of the classroom.

Dammit! This guy is unbelievable! A pretty girl wants you to watch her perform, and you’re taking so long to answer her! Everyone stared at Nie Yan with frustration and jealousy raging in their eyes, loathing the fact they couldn’t just run up and snag the ticket for themselves.

“What’s wrong, classmate Nie? Is the afternoon not good...?” Jiang Yingyu asked in a slightly awkward tone.

“If Nie Yan is too busy, I’m sure others would love to come and watch your performance!” Liu Wei interjected, then signalled Ge Baiyu with his eyes.

“Right! All of us here would love to cheer you on. Why don’t you give us the tickets?” Ge Baiyu shamelessly suggested.

Jiang Yingyu gazed at Nie Yan with a hint of bitterness in her eyes. She took out a second ticket from her pocket and handed both to Ge Baiyu. “Take them. They’re for adjacent seats. You can bring your girlfriend with you to watch.”

Ge Baiyu accepted the tickets with a bright smile. Even his thick skin couldn’t protect him from feeling slightly embarrassed.

Liu Wei and his group were a bit dejected. They naturally understood Jiang Yingyu’s intentions. They looked at Nie Yan with complicated expressions. Why couldn’t they be the target of such a beautiful woman’s affections?

Nie Yan pretended not to see and turned to Zhai Hao. “Xie Yao’s planning to take you guys levelling? What level is she?”

Zhai Hao hesitated for half-a-day before looking at Xia Ling in the

distance. He didn't know how to respond. Xia Ling had specifically instructed him not to reveal anything about Xie Yao's identity.

Zhai Hao this fellow definitely knew Xie Yao was Yao Yao. Likely this was also true in the previous timeline. Nie Yan had an inkling to rush up and give him a good beating, though the fault couldn't be placed entirely on him. Zhai Hao back then had no way of knowing the complicated relationship between him and Yao Yao. He could only blame his own thick headedness for being kept in the dark for so long.

"Don't worry. I've actually known for a while now." Nie Yan helplessly waved his hand. He could tell Zhai Hao was henpecked.

"Huh, so you already knew. You should've said so earlier. It would've saved me a lot of stress!" Zhai Hao's expression instantly relaxed. Since Nie Yan already knew, he no longer had to keep it a secret.

Chapter 372 - Monstrous Achievement

Nie Yan was a bit nervous as he awaited confirmation from Zhai Hao.

“The class goddess just finished handing in a quest. She’s already Level 53. I heard she recently obtained 3 pieces of Sub Legendary-grade equipment too,” Zhai Hao said off-handedly as he glanced at Liu Wei’s group. He wanted to see the reactions on their faces.

Nie Yan took a deep breath as a faint smile surfaced on his face. He had suffered a lot of hardships due to Xie Yao’s secretiveness! Every time they chatted about Conviction, she would always brush past the subject. Only now did he finally receive confirmation.

Liu Wei, Ge Baiyu, and their group dropped their jaws in shock. Xie Yao was Level 53? What a truly shocking revelation! A player at that level was most likely in the top 20 of the level leaderboards. On top of this, she also had three pieces of Sub Legendary-grade equipment. This was simply too frightening! Any piece of Sub Legendary-grade equipment would sell for at least several thousand gold in the marketplace, while those with good properties would sell in the excess of 10,000 gold. However, the key point was that this sort of equipment often couldn’t be bought. Generally only top ranked players could acquire Sub Legendary-grade equipment, and they wouldn’t put them up for sale, usually using it for themselves or giving it to a friend.

Three pieces of Sub Legendary-grade equipment, this was something unimaginable to Liu Wei.

At this moment, Liu Wei started to become fidgety. He had previously forgotten to ask Nie Yan and Zhai Hao what levels they were. He would be incredibly embarrassed if they were higher level than him.

Xie Yao, who was chatting with Tang Yue at the front of the classroom, repeatedly glanced over in Nie Yan’s direction. She felt

anxious not knowing what Nie Yan and Jiang Yingyu were talking about. Seeing their cheerful appearance, a tinge of jealousy surfaced in her heart. The person she normally couldn't stand the most was Jiang Yingyu. The two of them were often at loggerheads. Jiang Yingyu's figure even made her a little jealous. The girls were like oil and water. When she saw Jiang Yingyu getting close to her man, it was only natural she became restless.

"It's fine, just go over there," Tang Yue said with a teasing smile. She naturally understood her friend's thoughts of worry.

Xie Yao's face instantly blushed red like a ripe tomato.

Seeing Nie Yan shift the conversation topic to Xie Yao of all people, a flash of disappointment crossed Jiang Yingyu's face, only to be immediately replaced by a most brilliant smile. "Since you seem busy, forget it. I also play Conviction. I'm called Sparkling Song. If there's an opportunity, I'd like to play together with you some time. Nie Yan, what's your in-game name?"

Suddenly all the attention was focused on Nie Yan. Everybody wanted to know his in-game persona.

Nie Yan hesitated for half-a-day. He really didn't wish to reveal his identity as Nirvana Flame to these people. It would surely attract too much attention.

"If you're looking for someone to help you level, you can come to me. My ID is Yao Yao, the same yao (杳) that means dark and mysterious." Xie Yao walked over and held Nie Yan's hand.

Everyone widened their eyes in surprise. Xie Yao was a goddess in the hearts of numerous students. In spite of the rumours about Xie Yao and Nie Yan being a couple, they refused to believe there was actually anything going on between them. Given what they knew about Xie Yao's personality, she absolutely wouldn't be the one actively pursuing the relationship. Even if Nie Yan was trying to woo her, he could very well be left stranded on a sandy beach the very next day.

But reality proved otherwise. This was only their wishful thinking, nothing more.

Everyone witnessed Xie Yao taking the initiative to grab Nie Yan's hand. This was a huge mental blow, each and every one of them were shocked speechless. Countless hearts shattered like glass. Of the 10 male students present in the group, 9 of them had feelings for Xie Yao. They felt their hopes and dreams shatter into a million pieces. Who knew how many young men would drink themselves silly tonight in an attempt to wash away their heartache.

Xie Yao's action just now was undoubtedly a declaration to Jiang Yingyu. But it also served to help Nie Yan out of his pickle.

Xie Yao's faint fragrance wafted into Nie Yan's nose like a fresh spring breeze. He felt her soft and tender touch in his right hand. Despite being separated by clothes, he could still feel her well-developed figure which wasn't as fiery as Jiang Yingyu's but more well proportioned.

Nie Yan swept his gaze over the male students around him. When he saw the expressions of jealousy in their eyes, a sense of satisfaction welled up in his heart.

After enduring so many hardships, Nie Yan's mind had matured a lot. But he still found it hard to remain calm in this situation. This was because the person beside him was Xie Yao, the love of his life both past and present!

Nie Yan saw Zhai Hao secretly giving him a thumbs up. He couldn't help but break out into a smile.

"Umm, the next time I need to level I'll definitely look for you Xie Yao." Jiang Yingyu bit her lips, feeling a bit unresigned. "I'll be leaving first. I still have a rehearsal to attend. If you have the time, the two of you should come and watch my performance."

"Of course! We'll definitely come watch if we have the time!" Xie

Yao replied. At this moment she was also in a bit of a daze. She never imagined she would do something so brash either. But when she saw Jiang Yingyu with Nie Yan, an intense sense of crisis arose in her and she forgot everything else. She felt Nie Yan's arm lightly brushing against her bosom as a sense of annoyance and helplessness washed over her. He used this opportunity to take advantage of her! She gnashed her teeth in anger, but she couldn't let go right now.

Even Tang Yue never imagined Xie Yao would do something so hot-headed.

Jiang Yingyu gazed at Nie Yan.

Nie Yan was about to say goodbye. However, he felt a painful pinch on his arm. He turned to see Xie Yao's innocent smile paired with a frosty gaze. He instantly swallowed his words back. The sweet and gentle Xie Yao could become quite terrifying when she wanted to be.

Seeing Nie Yan was not going to say anything, Jiang Yingyu turned around and quietly left.

The two girls were rivals in love. The other people were only spectators. It was none of their business.

Liu Rui, who was sitting at the other side of the room, had witnessed the whole course of events. His balled fists were violently trembling as he tried to contain his anger with great effort.

"The academic test results are out. Let's go take a look." Xie Yao tugged at Nie Yan, then said to the others, "We'll be going. See you later, everyone."

Nie Yan hurriedly bid everyone farewell before being dragged away by Xie Yao.

"Ah, what a lucky guy. I wish I could be like him," Liu Wei said with a sigh, then turned to the several students beside him. "After

seeing our results, let's go out for a drink. We're going to rock 'till we drop!"

"Rock 'till we drop!"

Liu Wei's words immediately received the approval of the group. For the first time Zhai Hao's circle of friends viewed Liu Wei in a positive light. This was because they were comrades in heartbreak, degenerates in arms!

Xie Yao dragged Nie Yan to a quiet corner.

"Nie Yan, you and I need to have a serious discussion!" Xie Yao angrily exclaimed.

Nie Yan immediately showed an attentive expression.

"If I ever catch you flirting with Jiang Yingyu again, you better watch out I don't..." Xie Yao raised her fist and made a menacing gesture.

Seeing Xie Yao's appearance, Nie Yan couldn't help but burst out into laughter. He could never imagine her doing something like this in the previous timeline. He felt incredibly blessed at this moment.

Nie Yan and Xie Yao sat down in their respective seats, side by side. The students started searching for their results on the Top Military Academy's website. Over 30,000 students from all over the country were on the list. Xie Yao ranked in the top 700 in the academic portion of the exam. She had passed with flying colours!

Seeing Xie Yao's results, Nie Yan felt relieved. Even though he knew Xie Yao was definitely capable of entering the Top Military Academy, he was worried his interference in this life would negatively impact her academics in one way or another.

Nie Yan's results were a bit special. He was one of 300 students vying to become an Ace in the Top Military Academy.

After checking her own results, Xie Yao immediately moved her

seat beside Nie Yan. “Nie Yan, did you check your results yet?”

“No, not yet,” Nie Yan replied. He entered his student number into the website and was redirected to his results. He scored 503 points which was roughly what he predicted.

Seeing this score, Xie Yao felt her heart drop. The lowest cutoff score for becoming an Ace was 600 points in previous years.

At this moment, Nie Yan checked his rankings to see how he compared to the others. He was rank three in the academic portion, rank one in the fitness portion, and rank one overall.

Seeing the rankings, Xie Yao was shocked. Why did Nie Yan rank so high after only scoring 503 points? She found this hard to believe. She checked the note at the bottom of the rankings. The passing mark for this year was merely 301 points! Nie Yan had surpassed it by a full 202 points!

There was also a small explanation for why the cut-off score was so low this year. The Ace exams this time around emphasized practical knowledge more and was several times more difficult than previous years.

At this moment, Zhai Hao and the others walked over.

“So, Nie Yan. Did you pass?”

Almost everyone in the class was waiting for Nie Yan’s reply. When they saw the rankings on his computer screen, along with the explanation, they all sucked in a breath of cold air.

“Holy shit! He passed by over 200 points!”

“Fuck! How the hell are we supposed to compare! You’re making all the other guys look bad!”

Following shortly after were deep sighs. Nie Yan’s results immediately spread like wildfire throughout the entire school. The students from other classes were also deeply interested in how well he performed. So the students in Class 3 quickly shared the news to

their friends and peers.

Once everyone in the school learned of Nie Yan's results, they were struck speechless.

What frightening results! This was monstrous! It was practically inhuman!

Nie Yan never expected this outcome either. Since the Ace exam was so difficult, he never had any real hope of passing. After all, talented people were as numerous as the hair on nine oxens. Even if he had the advantage of living a second life, having studied many more years than others, talented people existed everywhere. To rank in the top 3 was truly something special.

He recalled hearing something about this year's Ace exams being especially difficult in the previous timeline. However, it was only in passing, and he didn't bother with it since he was so far removed from anything related to the Top Military Academy back then.

Xie Yao was also happy for Nie Yan. His future would surely be bright. At the same time she also worried. Nie Yan was so outstanding. Once he expanded his horizons and experienced more of the world, would she still have a place in his heart?

Chapter 373 - Magic Introduction

Nie Yan became the topic of conversation for the whole school. He was the third student in the history of Huahai High to enter the Top Military Academy as an Ace. This was an incredible honor!

Yang Boyi rushed over to congratulate Nie Yan whose results exceeded his expectations by a country mile. All the teachers and administrative staff were shocked. The school quickly got into action to celebrate this joyous event. It was crucial to publicize this news. A role model student like Nie Yan would undoubtedly increase enrollment numbers!

Yang Boyi pestered Nie Yan to no end, informing him that he would be attending interviews, giving speeches, and so on. Huahai High's foundation was formidable, so he didn't dare to not give face. He would accomplish every task they handed him with utmost perfection.

After being run ragged for three hours, Nie Yan was exhausted. However, the matter of the school's reputation had been taken care of.

Nie Yan had become a legend in Huahai High. This sort of achievement was the first of its kind in the school's history. Just a few hours later, word of his accomplishment had reached all the way to his hometown of Ningjiang. Likely there were other students in the school who also came from Ningjiang.

Back in Nie Yan's old high school, when his former classmates learned of his achievements, each and every one of them was completely flabbergasted. Nie Yan's grades in their class ranked in the top five at best. How did he suddenly become so amazing after transferring to Huahai High? When they asked around and confirmed it really was Nie Yan, they were speechless. This kind of transformation was too dramatic! They were starting to question reality.

After settling all his matters at school, Nie Yan drove Xie Yao back home before making a trip to his father's company. Once Father Nie learned Nie Yan had entered the Top Military Academy as an Ace, he was so elated he draped the halls in red silk and threw a company wide party.

Father Nie laughed heartily as he was surrounded by relatives, employees, and friends giving their congratulations. His face radiated like the spring sun. Seeing his father's gratified appearance, Nie Yan felt happy too. Recalling how much his parents had suffered in the previous timeline, he held back the urge to cry.

After two hours of celebrating, the atmosphere in the company finally settled down.

Nie Yan chatted with Ah Chen about the War God Tribe's development. Although everything was on the right track, the lack of funding still remained a vital issue. They required at least several hundred thousand gold to fully expand their base of operations.

Second to only Calore, Nisode was an ideal place to set up a foundation. It was the territory of the Tuoba Family. However, there were undercurrents of change flowing beneath the city. After falling victim to the machinations of the Century Financial Group, the Tuoba Family showed signs of withdrawing from the virtual reality industry altogether as they sold off a large portion of their virtual assets. All the while the several guilds under the Tuoba Family were in chaos as the administrative layer which oversaw them splintered and collapsed. In this environment, the War God Tribe thrived. With several dozen gaming orgs serving as the framework, they rapidly established themselves as the new dominant force in Nisode.

It was just like in the previous timeline. The Nie Family's immense capital was put on full display. With money serving as a weapon, they would naturally sweep away everything in their

path.

The War God Tribe's growth potential was unrivalled. Even with their development stunted in the previous timeline, they still reached a point where they could rival Victorious Return at the peak of their glory, even holding the advantage over them at some point. One could imagine just how glorious the War God Tribe was back then!

"No need to worry about the gold. I'll settle the issue by tomorrow," Nie Yan said. He would have plenty of gold after selling off the remaining Night Vision equipment. It would be used to invest in the War God Tribe, Sapphire Shrine, and Holy Empire. It was crucial these several guilds grew as well!

Nie Yan roughly understood the War God Tribe's situation after chatting with Ah Chen. Even though they had some minor setbacks, they were much better off compared to the previous timeline. After all, they had just started expanding their operations.

Thanks to the information Nie Yan provided, Father Nie participated in the Tuoba Family's dispute. He secretly bought a large amount of shares from several subsidiary companies owned by the Century Financial Group. Although the rate of acquisition was slow, it was nearly impossible to detect.

Father Nie understood this had to be done covertly, or the consequences would be severe if the Century Financial Group found out.

Nie Yan felt confident in his father's ability to properly run the company. The failure of the previous timeline was in part due to the War God Tribe requiring too much resources, and in part due to the rampant misuse of funds as well as the betrayal of Luo Ming's group. The danger of the latter was eliminated early on, and with him backing the War God Tribe, the burden on his father needing to purchase gold was greatly reduced. Like this, the crisis

that befell them in the previous timeline wouldn't see itself repeated.

Thanks to the success of the company, Father Nie's net worth surpassed ¥1 billion. Although this was nothing compared to those large financial groups, he could still be considered an accomplished businessman. With the rapid expansion of the company, they would inevitably branch out to other industries.

The future power structure of the Viridian Empire was already set in stone.

"There's been new movements from the Century Financial Group. They're currently investing a large amount of resources into Conviction and rapidly expanding their gold farming operations. I know you're at war with Bloodlust Blades, be careful," Ah Chen warned. This was news he had received not long ago.

"No worries. I have a pretty reliable source of income. I want for nothing more than to see the Century Financial Group go at it with me. We'll see who lasts until the end. Either way, in the long run, they'll be the ones losing out the most," Nie Yan said. His trade deal with Fallen Angel was extremely profitable.

"Huh? Really?" Ah Chen was a bit surprised. No matter how profitable Nie Yan's businesses were, several auction houses and the Starry Night Potion Shop couldn't possibly generate enough gold to compete with the Century Financial Group, right?

Nie Yan proceeded to explain his dealings with Fallen Angel in the Underworld, leaving Ah Chen speechless. No wonder Nie Yan could obtain so much Night Vision equipment! Every 10 days he would receive a terrifying sum of wealth. If the Century Financial Group truly took the step to compete with him, they would find they had fallen into a never-ending quagmire.

Bloodlust Blades was doomed to become the next abandoned child of the Century Financial Group. The Century Financial

Group was currently pouring most of its resources into Angel Corps, who was also looked favourably upon by two other powerful entities. Their growth far exceeded all other guilds. The Century Financial Group mainly backed Angel Corps. Guilds like Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors were disposable, and the Century Financial Group wouldn't hesitate to abandon them if their interests were truly threatened.

Before the release of flying mounts, Angel Corps was stuck in the Satreen Empire. They posed no danger for the time being, so Nie Yan could deal with Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors without fear. He was currently chipping away at the Century Financial Group's capital in preparation to deal with them in the future.

"Since you're confident about taking on the Century Financial Group, I guess I don't have to worry."

Ah Chen let out a deep sigh in his heart. The War God Tribe was truly blessed. With Nie Yan, they would never have to worry about gold. They could freely grow and expand their domain without restraint. They could take their time with building an in-house gold farming organisation and put all their energy into the guild.

Ah Chen informed Nie Yan of the War God Tribe's plans to capture strongholds while coordinating with Asskickers United.

Nie Yan looked over the plans and saw no problems. It was the correct choice to leave Ah Chen in charge of handling the War God Tribe's affairs.

Ah Chen was also tasked with running the War God Tribe in the previous timeline. He performed remarkably given the bad hand he was dealt. But sadly the enemy was too powerful. They had to fend off the combined power of Victorious Return, Radiant Sacred Flame, Bloodlust Blades, Alliances of Mages, and Divine Protectors. At the same time, The Century Financial Group was constantly manoeuvring against them in reality. These threats were

neutralized for the most part in this life, so the War God Tribe naturally wouldn't have to worry about them.

Nie Yan returned home from his father's company. Looking at the clock, it was almost time for the servers to come back online. After finishing supper, he headed upstairs to his room and put on his game helmet. There were still 20 minutes left, so he couldn't log into the game yet. But he could browse the web.

Nie Yan started looking up information related to magic barriers.

Magic barriers were a type of formation created out of magical energy. They required a catalyst such as a magical array, runes, or a scroll.

Seeing this, Nie Yan recalled seeing the runes engraved on the bars of the cell door. He guessed they were what was powering the magic barrier which prevented anything from passing through.

Nie Yan continued reading the information. There were all sorts of formations used to create magic barriers, along with many different classifications. He would have to investigate the runes engraved on the bars to identify the magic barrier surrounding the prison cell.

After looking through other related topics, Nie Yan still failed to find anything useful.

Don't tell me the only way to open that cell is by killing the Black Flame Hellhound? Nie Yan despaired. He was nowhere near strong enough to do that!

Nie Yan suddenly recalled a short passage pertaining to magic immunity at the beginning of the page. It was an introduction to magic published on the official website.

「Magic is an undying spirit. The world has the sharpest sword as well as the sturdiest shield. When the flow or circuit of magic is broken, magical energy can no longer be guided.」

This was referring to magic immunity!

In other words, magic immunity from the angle of element formation could completely isolate magical energy from the rest of the world!

Chapter 374 - Great Thief

Magic immunity isolates magic energy. Formations are created out of magic energy. Can I penetrate the formation with magic immunity? Nie Yan carefully pondered on the matter. This theory is worth giving a spin.

Since magic immunity could interfere with the flow of magic energy and isolate it from the rest of the world, there was no reason it couldn't do the same to something created out of magic energy such as the barrier. Nie Yan recalled encountering similar situations in the previous timeline, specifically during stronghold wars.

Nie Yan wondered if his idea would really pan out.

Ten minutes later, Nie Yan entered the game. He was still in the corner he logged off at in the narrow dungeon under the colosseum. The smell of decay wafted into his nose.

Nie Yan looked into the prison cell and saw Pallot reclined in the corner sleeping. Sensing Nie Yan's presence, Pallot opened his eyes which flashed with a sharp light.

Pallot gazed at Nie Yan. "Devil Slayer, you're back. Have you made any progress?"

"Hold on a moment, Sir Pallot." Nie Yan faintly smiled. He crouched down and examined the bars on the cell. Each one was thick and sturdy and inscribed with mysterious runes which radiated magic energy.

This was a Dark Barrier, a high-level protective formation. The skill capable of breaking through this type of protective formation could be learned at Level 100 at the earliest.

The gap between the bars was roughly 5 inches wide, not even big enough for a person to squeeze their head through.

When Nie Yan reached out his right hand and touched the thin

membrane protecting the cell, a powerful jolt of energy forced him back. He was almost sent flying. Only after being pushed back several steps did he regain his footing. A numbing sensation coursed through his arm.

What a strong repelling force!

It took a long time for Nie Yan to regain feeling in his arm.

Pallot wondered what in the world Nie Yan was doing crouched down beside the barrier. When he saw Nie Yan getting blown away, he hurriedly warned, “Devil Slayer, do not attempt to break this barrier! It contains over 600 Megacycles of magic energy. Only a Level 180 Great Mage can break it!”

Nie Yan simply shook his head with a faint smile. “Just sit back and watch.” He walked back up to the prison cell. Even though he had to go through that unpleasant experience just now, he confirmed that the energy powering the barrier was no different from regular magic energy.

Pallot’s eyes widened in surprise. Did Nie Yan really have a method to get past the barrier? This was beyond his expectations.

Pallot stared intently at Nie Yan, observing his every action.

At this moment, Nie Yan put on the Animorph Necklace and Pygmy Ring.

Animorph!

Nie Yan shone with a brilliant light as he morphed into a black lynx. He had shrunk to less than a third his original size. His Dexterity and Jump increased by 300%, and he became more suited to running in mountains and woodlands.

Even after becoming a lynx, he was still too big.

Pygmy Transformation!

Nie Yan rapidly shrunk to the size of a small housecat. He was now small enough to fit through the five-inch gaps between the

bars.

Pallot was shocked by Nie Yan's transformation. "Devil Slayer, you have some very rare magic items!"

Nie Yan finally activated Adjudicator of God, giving himself magic immunity. He sucked in his chest and slowly approached the barrier. He was extremely nervous. If this idea didn't work, he would be blown back again.

As Nie Yan walked forward, the thin membrane protecting the cell warped and twisted before gradually giving way.

Nie Yan's body passed through the barrier as he slowly made his way into the cell from a gap between the bars.

Any part of the barrier that touched Nie Yan would dissipate into nothing.

Magic energy was a type of particle that was omnipresent in the world of Conviction with its own unique laws governed by the system. Those who could comprehend and manipulate these laws would become powerful existences. Those who attempted to challenge these laws or destroy them altogether would inevitably be wiped into nonexistence.

By using the magic immunity from Adjudicator of God to bypass the barrier, Nie Yan was making use of the already present laws in the world of Conviction.

When Nie Yan finally passed through the gap between the bars and entered the cell, the barrier returned to normal.

Nie Yan cancelled his active skills and rapidly returned to his original size.

Witnessing how Nie Yan got into the cell, Pallot was completely blown away. He never imagined someone could use this sort of method to bypass a barrier.

"What did I say, Sir Pallot? And look, here I am!" Nie Yan greeted

with a smile.

“Sir Devil Hunter, out of the numerous mysterious and outstanding people I’ve met in my life, you definitely rank among the very top!” Pallot praised. He viewed Nie Yan in a new light, evident by how he added a ‘Sir’ to his address.

Nie Yan naturally detected the change in Pallot’s speech.

He took out an Instant Transfer Scroll and handed it to Pallot. “Here, take this. With it, you can leave this damned place.”

Pallot accepted the Instant Transfer Scroll. “Thank you, Sir Devil Hunter. I’ll be taking my leave. We’ll meet again in Calore’s Thief Association.”

“Alright.” Nie Yan nodded.

Pallot used the Instant Transfer Scroll and disappeared into a ray of light.「Klang! Klang! Klang!」The shackles and chains that bound him dropped to the floor. He was no longer in the cell.

Nie Yan checked his quest progress.

Rescued Hostages: 100/100

Quest completed! Return to the Thief Association to receive your reward!

I’ve cleared my class advancement quest! Nie Yan’s cracked into a faint smile. The difficulty of this quest had somewhat exceeded his expectations, especially the last part where he had to get past the barrier. If he hadn’t thought of using Animorph, Pygmy Transformation, and Adjudicator of God together, he would have no choice but to fight the Level 70 Blackflame Hellhound, dropping his chances of success to almost zero.

Thankfully, he had freed the final hostage without a hitch.

Nie Yan took out a Return Scroll and started channelling. Instant Transfer Scrolls were quest items and couldn’t be bought. Players could only settle for scrolls that took 20 seconds to activate.

With a bright flash of light, Nie Yan returned to Calore.

Calore was still as bustling as ever. Thinking about the reward he would receive for completing his Great Thief class advancement quest, Nie Yan couldn't help but become excited. He recalled how much effort it took him just to complete his class advancement quest on Easy in the previous timeline. When he finally succeeded, he was brought to tears with elation.

Back then, Nie Yan wore the Fabulous Set, which wasn't all that amazing in spite of its name. It was only a Level 60 Silver-grade set, but it was decent among ordinary players at the time. All his valuables added together amounted to roughly 60 gold.

Nie Yan had turned his luck around in this life. Even with a conservative estimate, the value of all his equipment, including Lil' Gold, was no less than 100,000 gold.

This was a monumental difference!

This was also why Nie Yan dared to do his class advancement quest on Expert.

During those dark times, Nie Yan spent every day in hardship. In spite of this, he clenched his teeth and persevered. This was the most valuable thing he had taken with him in rebirth!

Nie Yan walked through the bustling streets and arrived at the entrance of the Thief Association. He pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Nie Yan saw Pallot sitting in a seat up ahead, wearing the unmistakable cloak that represented an Elder of the Thief Association. Pallot immediately got up from his seat after seeing Nie Yan enter.

“Thank you, Sir Devil Slayer, and congratulations in advance on becoming a Great Thief. You've performed remarkably. In addition to the title of Great Thief, we've decided to also confer to you a Medal of Honor. You're the first to receive this reward in the

history of the Thief Association!” Pallot exclaimed.

The Thief Association’s Medal of Honor? Nie Yan had never heard of this item before, nor had he ever seen anyone talking about it online.

Great Thief Class Advancement Quest (Expert) completed! You have received 532,918 experience and 300 gold.

Nie Yan lit up with a white light as he directly levelled up to Level 55. The experience was great, but the 300 gold reward was negligible to him.

You have received the title of Great Thief.

Nie Yan checked his character information. All his stats were increased by 30%, his health rose to over 4,000 points, and the category of both his attack and defense had changed from Ordinary to Enhanced.

Nie Yan didn’t know the complex formulas that went into calculating attack and defense. But it was rumoured that Leather Armour (Enhanced) would reduce damage by at least 60%.

After becoming a Great Thief, players were given a bit more freedom to express themselves. They were allowed to integrate some real-world fighting techniques into the in-game combat. Of course, it was still limited by the system.

Stepping into the Adept Class was when many players started to truly shine. Nie Yan understood that he would have to face many new challenges in the future. The Adept Class players weren’t nearly as easy to deal with as ordinary players.

Even after reaching his peak at Level 180, Nie Yan still hadn’t mastered every single Great Thief technique.

Every player played the game their own way, so they were bound to develop a style of combat unique to them.

For Nie Yan, becoming a Great Thief was the beginning of a

brand new journey. He was walking on a strange yet familiar path.

Chapter 375 - Preparations for Capturing an Intermediate Stronghold

Great Thief, this title bore the weight of Nie Yan's past memories.

There were many Great Thief skills. Every player had their own unique understanding of these skills and would use them to different effect. Given that Nie Yan's comprehension of the Thief class had grown a layer deeper, he would surely be a much deadlier Great Thief in this life.

Nie Yan took out the Great Thief skill book he had previously looted to examine.

Reverse Grip Backstab (Freedom Skill)

Description: Become invincible for 2 seconds after evading an enemy's attack. Circle behind them and retaliate with an attack. Enhances Backstab damage.

Requirements: Action (Weapon), 50 Rage

Properties: Deal an additional 100%–300% damage. Ignores armour.

Cooldown: 30 Seconds

Restrictions: Great Thief; can be learned by any faction.

Great Thief skills generally carried the label of Freedom Skill. If used well, a player could display up to three times their normal combat strength; otherwise, they would be no different from regular skills.

Nie Yan learned the skill and glanced at his skill bar. Reverse Grip Backstab required Rage, which could be generated through combat.

Reverse Grip Backstab was a Combo Skill which built up combo

points. The higher the combo, the more damage a Finisher Skill would deal.

Nie Yan would have to acquire the Combo and Finisher Skills for Great Thieves a step at a time. His skill bar would undergo a massive transformation in the time to come. Most regular skills would start being replaced by Freedom Skills while others could be upgraded to Freedom Skills through quests.

Nie Yan was excited to finally be a Great Thief again. There were many facets of the new class he was familiar with, while some would pose brand new challenges.

“Sir Devil Slayer, let me congratulate you once more on becoming a Great Thief. Here is your Medal of Honor. We hope you’ll bring glory to the Thief Association,” Pallot said in a formal tone.

Nie Yan accepted the Medal of Honor. It was crafted out of a dark metal with many mysterious engravings from the Era of Shared Governance. He examined its properties.

Great Thief Medal of Honor (Nirvana Flame)

Properties: Stealth +20, Awareness +30

Phantom Assassination (Freedom Skill): Slash the enemy’s throat after dodging an attack, dealing additional critical damage for every combo point. Cooldown: 60 seconds.

Death Exemption: Become immune to all crowd control effects and gain 10% movement speed for 2 seconds.

Restrictions: Nirvana Flame; cannot be dropped or traded.

Phantom Assassination and Death Exemption were undoubtedly two powerful skills. Phantom Assassination was similar to Reverse Grip Backstab in the sense that it was also a Freedom Skill he would have to take the time for to properly master. Death Exemption wasn’t any less useful. It could save his life at a crucial moment.

Nie Yan equipped the Great Thief Medal of Honor.

“Sir Nirvana Flame, I wish you glory on your journey.”

“Thank you, Sir Pallot,” Nie Yan said. He bid farewell to Pallot and left the Thief Association, deep in thought. It was crucial for him to master Great Thief skills if he wanted to grow. He would gather more Freedom Skills one by one and learn to use them skillfully. Only then would he become truly strong.

Nie Yan walked through the busy streets of Calore and headed to the auction house.

Draped in a large cloak, Nie Yan easily blended into the mass of people flowing down the street. He would attract too much attention without it.

Nie Yan happened to open the Super Trade Channel. The number of concurrent visitors had ballooned to more than 1,000,000. Every day there was a frightening amount transactions. Thanks to the convenience of the Super Trade Channel, the auction houses in Calore saw a 70% increase in sales. His daily profit from the six auction houses under his control rose from just several thousand gold to over 30,000 gold.

Countless players were paying close attention to the Super Trade Channel for the off-chance Night Vision equipment were put up for sale again.

After a while, Nie Yan arrived at the auction house. He offloaded his final batch of Night Vision equipment, which was of even higher quality than the previous, into the marketplace. The auction house immediately erupted into a bidding frenzy, attracting the attention of every player in Calore. The rich players were frantically bidding over each item while the poor could only look on in envy, praying something within their range of affordability, like equipment with Night Vision +2 or +3, would appear.

The bidding frenzy drove Bloodlust Mad Blade crazy. He understood that all the profits generated from the Night Vision equipment would flow into Nie Yan's pockets. Even with a conservative estimate, Nie Yan was set to make at least 400,000 gold. How was Bloodlust Blades to survive?

Nie Yan didn't care. As long as Bloodlust Blades was standing, he would never take down the bounty!

Nie Yan made a trip to the guild office. The players there were smiling from ear to ear. There was nothing more satisfying than knowing their enemies were suffering.

Seeing Nie Yan walking in, all of them rushed up to greet him. His appearance sent waves through the entire office.

"Where's Bladelight and them?" Nie Yan asked Guo Huai.

"They headed to the Nilan Colosseum like you asked. They're preparing to clear the whole map. I estimate they'll be back in about an hour," Guo Huai replied.

"Alright. When they get back, let them know we're going to capture an Intermediate Stronghold," Nie Yan informed. He believed the time was ripe.

"Today?" Guo Huai asked in surprise. He originally wanted to wait a few more days.

"We won't disturb the people who are in the middle of their class advancement quest. Those under Level 50 will level two or three times by participating in this expedition, much faster than levelling outside. Start looking for people. We need at least 5,000 players over Level 45," Nie Yan instructed. Capturing an Intermediate Stronghold was a huge undertaking.

Nie Yan started making his preparations. He took out 60,000 gold to purchase a large amount of potions, scrolls, and various other consumables.

Violet Smoke sent over a batch of Magic Bombs. There were more

than 6,000 Junior Magic Bombs and 1,000 Intermediate Magic Bombs. Intermediate Magic Bombs dealt 500 area-of-effect damage, and 300% bonus damage to Machine-type enemies.

All of Asskickers United stirred into action. Guo Huai started assembling players as the administrative team busily got to work, spreading Nie Yan's words to the players of the guild.

When the players of Asskickers United levelling in the various maps surrounding Calore received word that Nie Yan was organizing a guild expedition, they immediately used their Return Scrolls without a second thought. Many abandoned their quests midway, and those who couldn't contacted the guild higher-ups to let them know.

The transfer points in Calore lit up brilliantly as players from Asskickers United returned in large numbers. All of them rushed to the guild office. A crowd was slowly building outside the entrance as more and more players arrived. Guo Huai and the others were busily doing a headcount. Those who were marked down were told to gather in United City.

Nie Yan was giving orders in the guild office as he received reports from Guo Huai.

On the side, he was also receiving notifications from the auction houses.

Your Frost Condensing Cloak has been successfully auctioned off for 5,200 gold!

Your Boulder Battle Armour has been successfully auctioned off for 5,880 gold!

The equipment Nie Yan listed up for sale today was the best out of the lot. Besides the Night Vision, the other properties were also good. Even without the Night Vision, they would be considered decent pieces of equipment. This sort of equipment was highly sought-after by high-end players.

Before long, Nie Yan received 510,000 gold, more than he expected. He had Ah Chen come over and take away 250,000 gold for the development of the War God Tribe. With this gold, they would have no funding issues for the time being. He also gave 50,000 gold each to Sapphire Shrine and Holy Empire. They had helped out a lot in the conflict with Bloodlust Blades.

Besides this, 60,000 gold was previously used to buy consumables.

Of the 510,000 gold only 100,000 gold remained, which Nie Yan planned to leave in the guild treasury for daily guild expenditures. With all his revenue sources combined, he made over 80,000 gold a day.

Asskickers United currently had about 500,000 gold in the bank. Add this to the profits from the various virtual properties, lasting six or seven days was no problem. By then, Nie Yan would be back with more equipment from the Underworld to sell.

Asskickers United would have no funding issues in the foreseeable future. As for Bloodlust Blades, they were already running on fumes. How much longer they could last, no one knew.

After settling all these matters, Nie Yan relaxed. He glanced at his skill bar. He really had to find some time to master Reverse Grip Backstab and Phantom Assassination, or these two powerful skills would go to waste.

A while later, Bladelight and the others returned. There were over 500 players gathered outside the entrance of the guild office. All of them were either squad leaders or important figures in the guild. The rest of the players were already waiting on standby at United City.

Chapter 376 - Cripps Stronghold

Nie Yan walked out of the guild office. There was a vast crowd of players from Asskickers United gathered in the square outside. They excitedly greeted him in large waves.

“We’re going to capture an Intermediate Stronghold, right? How confident are you?” Smoke Stub walked up to Nie Yan and asked. He was puzzled by Nie Yan insistence on taking on an Intermediate Stronghold when there were so many Basic Strongholds available. They didn’t even know what sort of monsters guarded an Intermediate Stronghold. However, Nie Yan had done his research. He wouldn’t make a rash decision.

“Don’t worry,” Nie Yan reassured with a smile. He had read up on Intermediate Strongholds in the previous timeline. It shouldn’t be too difficult for them to clear one.

Seeing the look of confidence on Nie Yan’s face, Smoke Stub didn’t say anything further. Nie Yan wasn’t the type to act on impulse.

“Guo Huai, tell Sapphire Shrine and Holy Empire to closely monitor Victorious Return. We don’t want them pulling anything funny while we’re trying to clear the stronghold,” Nie Yan ordered. Although Victorious Return’s glory days were long over, even a dying viper could still deliver a nasty bite.

“Relax. I don’t think Victorious Return will try anything. Even Sapphire Shrine and Holy Empire are stronger than them now. With so many guilds joining forces to take them down, they won’t even know what hit them,” Guo Huai reassured. Since Victorious Return had gone radio silent, with their members steering clear of trouble, Asskickers United couldn’t be bothered to deal with them any longer. But if they tried anything funny, they would instantly face the combined wrath of Asskickers United, Sapphire Shrine, and Holy Empire. No matter how much of a fight Victorious

Return put up, they would be crushed all the same.

“What’s our headcount?” Nie Yan asked.

“5,020 players in total, with 532 of them here and the rest on standby in United City,” Guo Huai answered. This was the most elite force Asskickers United had ever gathered together.

Nie Yan ordered Guo Huai to divide the players into 26 companies. He assigned at least one Priest with Junior Revive and a capable leader to each company. He also decided on some rules to follow when clearing the Intermediate Stronghold. All he had to do was pass down his orders to the company leaders.

There was also a special 20-man task force composed of 12 Fighters and 8 Priests, which included the likes of Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, Yi Yan, Black Heaven, Painted Muslin, Young Seven, and Moon Child.

This task force would serve as the shield of the expedition team. It was their job to engage powerful bosses.

It took an hour just to get everyone organized, but it couldn’t be helped since there were so many players participating.

Nie Yan stood off to the side, waiting for the administrative team to finish sorting everything out.

Nie Yan was chatting with the others when Yao Yao dressed in her light blue robes walked over to him.

“Nirvana Flame, do you need my help with anything?” Yao Yao asked.

Nie Yan turned around to look at Yao Yao. Her equipment ranked among the top in Asskickers United. He had only gifted her one piece of Sub Legendary-grade equipment. She had gotten the other two all by herself. Furthermore, the rewards for completing the first two quests in the Karsi’s Blessing quest line had probably raised her stats significantly.

Nie Yan had confirmed earlier in the day that Yao Yao and Xie Yao were one and the same. He couldn't help but think back to his past life. Yao Yao's previous timeline counterpart was nowhere near as strong as her present self. He recalled she kept her level roughly close to his, only ever really doing any levelling when he invited her to play, nor did she really care about her equipment. Given the Dragonsoar Financial Group's resources, she could've easily left him in the dust. But instead she chose to stay by his side.

Nie Yan started to realize how deeply Xie Yao cared about him in the previous timeline. Yet all he had given in return was grief and pain. Thinking about how sad and lonely she looked during their class reunions back then, he was wrought with guilt, his heart aching.

"Share your stats and gear with me for a second." Nie Yan took a deep breath to settle his mind. Xie Yao, let me atone for my past mistakes in this life!

"Alright." Xie Yao nodded.

Nie Yan scanned through her character information. All of her Sub Legendary-grade equipment had pretty good supplementary skills, one with area-of-effect, one with crowd control, and one with high single-target damage. She had also learned Rank 1 and Rank 2 Templar Magic.

Rank 1 Advanced Magic was pretty common, with many players in Asskickers United knowing one or two skills. Rank 2 Advanced Magic was much rarer. Yao Yao was perhaps the only player in Asskickers United to know one. Her Rank 2 Advanced Magic was called Radiant Fetters. It could bind a single target for 15 to 30 seconds and had a cooldown of two days. Since it could be interrupted midcast, the player had to stay focused!

Nie Yan was shocked by the description of Radiant Fetters. It was definitely an extraordinary team assisting skill. It would be extremely useful against bosses.

“Yao Yao, you don’t need to go anywhere. Just stay by my side,” Nie Yan said. He planned to use Radiant Fetters to its full potential!

“Nirvana Flame, you’re not abusing your authority, are you?” Moon Child giggled. She already knew Nie Yan was Nirvana Flame. Staring at Xie Yao and then Nie Yan, she felt the two looked like a match made in heaven. After being close friends with Xie Yao for so many years, she had a good understanding of her friend’s personality, so she was shocked by what occurred earlier in the afternoon.

Xie Yao looked a little embarrassed.

Nie Yan chuckled. Even if he was, so what?

The expedition team was finally ready to set out. “We’re making a stop at our guild headquarters in United City first!” Nie Yan announced.

The crowd of players entered the transfer point in the guild office and returned to United City.

United City. Thanks to the efforts of Guo Huai working alongside the Dragonsoar Financial Group, this stronghold city flourished. Rows and rows of shops lined the main road as players crossed and weaved and pushed past each other, browsing through the goods on display behind the windows.

Such a large crowd gathering outside the plaza of the main guild headquarters naturally caught the attention of the regular players visiting United City.

“Is Asskickers United about to make a move on Bloodlust Blades?”

“It’s quite possible. They look like they’re all elites of Asskickers United.”

“An inter-city battle? Glory City is Bloodlust Blade’s domain!”

“Is there anything Asskickers United doesn’t dare to do?”

Remember when Nirvana Flame and his 20 companions ran amok in Glory City and still got away unscathed? Well now it's not just 20, it's 5,000!"

The news spread like wildfire and soon reached the ears of the enemy. Mad Blade anxiously dispatched forces to prepare for the incoming assault as all of Bloodlust Blades geared up for battle. Only a minute later, it was revealed that Asskickers United wasn't going to war at all but simply setting off to capture an Intermediate Stronghold. Bloodlust Blades had gotten all worked up for nothing.

Nie Yan ran some drills with the expedition team. It was crucial that each company could execute his orders without delay. Only like this could they function as a whole.

Nie Yan found several capable players, such as Smoke Stub, Paladin of the Elegy, and Lustboy, and put them in charge of a company each. He also further divided the companies into squads. Like this, it would be easier to give out orders.

Only after running drills for roughly two hours did the expedition team set out for the Intermediate Cripps Stronghold.

The earth rumbled as more than 5,000 players streamed out of the gates of United City on horseback into the valley below.

Nie Yan rode ahead of the expedition team. As a Thief he could scout out the circumstances around the Cripps Stronghold before the others arrived. His Faulkner Warhorse was also fast enough to give him an hour's lead over ordinary players.

The Cripps Stronghold was constructed during the Era of Shared Governance to guard against a possible counterattack from the dragons. It was later abandoned, falling into ruin through years of neglect, and then occupied by creatures of darkness.

This was the only information about the Cripps Stronghold given on the official website. Not much could be discerned. However, Nie Yan knew this stronghold was close to many well-known levelling

spots such as the Lamia Lair, Spider Hole, and Infernal Everglades, all of which were Level 60–70 maps, and a little further were multiple Level 80 maps. In the previous timeline, the Cripps Stronghold became the go-to destination for players ranging between Level 60–80. And at the peak of its popularity, when the player base had reached Level 60, it was dubbed Mini Calore for rivalling the largest city in the Viridian Empire in commerce.

Capturing the Cripps Stronghold would be extremely beneficial to Asskickers United and the Dragonsoar Financial Group. To the former it was an endless source of gold, and to the latter there was no better location to set up a real-world business district.

In the previous timeline, Cao Xu had profited immensely from the Cripps Stronghold. In this life, Nie Yan planned to snatch it away for himself. The Century Financial Group would have no business here.

Chapter 377 - Phantom Assassination

The ancient walls covered in cracks and moss, with many regions having collapsed into ruins, served as a testament to the bleak history of the Cripps Stronghold.

This square-shaped stronghold which covered an area of 5,000 by 5,000 meters still showed traces of its former glory. In the previous timeline, after clearing out all the monsters, Victorious Return rebuilt it from the ground up.

Back then, the Cripps Stronghold with its renewed life and flourishing commerce was a marvel worthy of players' admiration.

It was important for Nie Yan to continue making both himself and Asskickers United stronger. Only then would they stand a chance against the Century Financial Group. Securing the Cripps Stronghold was a must.

In this life, the Century Financial Group had withdrawn most of their capital from the Viridian Empire and redirected all their time and energy on Angel Corps in the Satreen Empire. However, Nie Yan still felt an impending sense of crisis. The Century Financial Group was a behemoth of an existence no one could rival in the virtual reality industry.

Nie Yan galloping like the wind on his Faulkner Warhorse arrived outside the Cripps Stronghold. He dismounted and slowly approached. From memory its interior was akin to a vast labyrinth with many buildings spread out in a complex fashion. Investigating such a place was going to be a huge pain.

Nie Yan entered the Cripps Stronghold, where he was greeted by a bluestone paved street about 100 meters wide, big enough to allow 100 people to walk side by side. On both sides were broken down shops, a small reminder of a once bustling populous.

Black armoured swordsmen roamed the street. Nie Yan inspected

one with Transcendent Insight.

Phantom Swordsman (Elite): Level 50

Health: 35,000/35,000

Even the weakest monsters in the Cripp Strongholds were Elites. Lords were far from rare, and Super Variant and Demonized Lords appearing was possible too. The only way to deal with such powerful monsters was with numbers!

Nie Yan entered stealth and proceeded forward. The numerous wide-open streets weaved and crossed with each other. He occasionally encountered small squares big enough to fit 600 players. These plazas were often occupied by Lords ranging from Level 50–60.

Marking down all the bosses he encountered, Nie Yan started creating a map of the Cripps Stronghold. His stealth ability was unrivalled. Not a single monster spotted him.

Nie Yan slowly made his way to the center of the map, successfully avoiding the Phantom Swordsmen roaming the streets. As he passed by a run-down street, he happened to notice the unmistakable sparkle of a gold treasure chest not far away. It was tucked away in a corner patrolled by a Phantom Swordsman.

Only a single Phantom Swordsman, dealing with it will be a piece of cake! Nie Yan thought. How could he pass up on this treasure chest?

Nie Yan slowly crept up behind the Phantom Swordsman. It passively wandered about, occasionally stopping to look around.

The Phantom Swordsman as a Level 50 humanoid Elite possessed high Awareness.

Nie Yan was extremely careful with his steps as he approached from behind. He adjusted his grip on Zennarde's Sword and pounced forward with a Smothering Strike aimed at the back of the Phantom Swordsman's head.

Nie Yan was as fast as lightning. But even so, the Phantom Swordsman lit up with a golden radiance at the very last moment. Although the attack landed, the Phantom Swordsman wasn't stunned and retaliated with a sweeping slash.

"Crap!" Nie Yan cried out in alarm. He never expected the senses of the Phantom Swordsman to be so sharp. He hurriedly raised Zennarde's Sword in an attempt to parry. A loud klang! rang out as a powerful force travelled down his arm and pushed him back several steps.

-831

The Phantom Swordsman didn't let up and charged after Nie Yan.

Nie Yan activated his Blackbright Barrier while quickly falling back.

The Phantom Swordsman slashed down its sword at Nie Yan. Its blade radiated a sharp sword light.

Nie Yan suddenly shifted his footwork.

Reverse Grip Backstab!

Nie Yan stumbled mid-execution as he attempted to avoid the attack. The Phantom Swordsman struck him squarely, causing his Blackbright Barrier to shudder.

-307

Reverse Grip Backstab was a difficult skill to pull off. There seemed to be some sort of a trick he had yet to grasp. Clumsy movement would only lead to the skill failing.

The Phantom Swordsman refused to let up and hacked down at Nie Yan once more.

Nie Yan activated Gale Step to block the attack and countered with a Concussive Blow to the Phantom Swordsman's forehead.

With the Phantom Swordsman stunned, Nie Yan circled around

and unleashed a flurry of attacks.

Backstab!

Eviscerate!

Blood spurted out into the air like a fountain.

-539

-538

-255

-100...

A string of damage values floated up into the air. Nie Yan continued his ruthless assault, dealing massive damage to the Phantom Swordsman.

When the Phantom Swordsman was about to break free from the stun, Nie Yan plunged Zennarde's Sword into its back and activated Blast.「Bang!」It flew out like a loose kite before crashing into the ground with a heavy thud, only struggling back to its feet after a long time.

The Phantom Swordsman charged at Nie Yan yet again.

In order to avoid attracting the attention of other Phantom Swordsmen nearby, Nie Yan couldn't use items like Flash Powder. Seeing the Phantom Swordsman closing in, he activated Gale Retreat and pulled back as fast as he could.

This alleyway was too narrow, but he ran the risk of attracting other monsters if he fled too far. He could only summon up the courage to duke it out with the Phantom Swordsman in here.

Just as the Phantom Swordsman arrived in front of him, Nie Yan's footwork changed yet again.

Phantom Assassination!

Nie Yan transformed into a blur as his body started moving in an unpredictable manner. He slashed the Phantom Swordsman's neck

in the blink of an eye as blood splattered on the ground.

Despite Nie Yan's erratic movements, the Phantom Swordsman still managed to graze him.

-239

Phantom Assassination: 35% Completion, 52% damage, 0 Combo

Every Freedom Skill required some technique to execute. Without properly grasping these movements, even a seasoned Shadow Dancer would look clumsy. For Nie Yan to perform this well on his first try was an impressive achievement.

Chapter 378 - Foreign Players

On top of dealing 321 damage, Nie Yan's Phantom Assassination also inflicted the Phantom Swordsman with continuous poison and bleed damage.

Nie Yan only attempted Phantom Assassination and Reverse Grip Backstab to get a feel for these two Freedom Skills which were unfamiliar to him. Even at his peak during the previous timeline, he had only learned three Freedom Skills in total.

Back then, Nie Yan had holed himself up in one spot for two months practicing non-stop just to gain a basic mastery of a Freedom Skill. This was a gradual process that took time and dedication.

To execute a Freedom Skill without any prior experience was incredibly difficult.

Thanks to his comprehension of Shadow Dancer techniques, along with his many years of experience, Nie Yan figured out the basic principle behind Phantom Assassination on his first attempt. Although he had barely gotten his foot in the door, this first step was crucial. From this point forward, he could slowly familiarize himself with the skill until he was fully proficient.

The Phantom Swordsman rushed at Nie Yan with Charge, a skill that stunned the enemy upon collision. It was extremely deadly when paired with something like Cleave.

Just as the Phantom Swordsman's blade hacked down, Nie Yan evaded with Shadow Waltz. He dashed forward and slashed the enemy's chest with Zennarde's Sword.

Nie Yan brushed past the Phantom Swordsman and continued running.

At this moment, the Phantom Swordsman let out a deep and low roar. It was Demoralizing Shout, a skill that briefly immobilized all

surrounding enemies.

Sensing something off when the Phantom Swordsman didn't immediately give chase, Nie Yan activated Death Exemption.

A heavy sound wave swept through Nie Yan, but all that happened was a Miss floating up above his head.

Death Exemption was a skill granted by his Medal of Honor that negated the effects of Demoralizing Shout.

Nie Yan glanced at the Phantom Swordsman. He had already shaved away 70% of its health bar. Perhaps he was the only player who could solo a Level 50 Elite.

The Phantom Swordsman's combat ability was too powerful. It had too many crowd control skills at its disposal. Even a party of peak players would have a tough time dealing with it.

The Phantom Swordsman brandished its sword once more and pursued the quickly retreating Nie Yan.

As Nie Yan continued kiting the Phantom Swordsman, his health fell to 22%. He quickly drank an Intermediate Health Potion.

Nie Yan refused to directly tangle with the Phantom Swordsman. He would immediately retreat every time he landed a successful attack, letting the bleed and poison damage do all the work. The opponent's attacks were sharp and overbearing, putting him under heavy pressure.

Slowly but surely, the Phantom Swordsman's health fell to 20%, with roughly 7,000 health remaining.

The Phantom Swordsman lost its mind and fell into a berserk state, an ominous aura overflowing from its body. Its muscles bulged outwards and its speed increased dramatically.

Nie Yan rapidly pulled back. Looking at his remaining 13% health, he wrapped himself with an Advanced Combat Bandage.

+200

+200...

Gale Step happened to come off cooldown right at this moment.

Charge!

Decimating Blow!

The Phantom Swordsman chopped down on Nie Yan with a mighty sword of raging flames.

Gale Step! Nie Yan blocked the Decimating Blow, then slashed the Phantom Swordsman's throat with Zennarde's Sword.

Cut Throat!

-1,735! Blood sprayed out into the air as a frightening damage value floated up above the Phantom Swordsman's head.

It was a critical hit!

The Phantom Swordsman let out a deep roar, slamming its sword into the ground and sending out a powerful shock wave that engulfed everything within a two-meter radius.

However, Nie Yan had already opened a distance of several meters thanks to the speed boost granted by Gale Step.

All the while Nie Yan's health continued to rise. Advanced Combat Bandages were potent healing items.

The Phantom Swordsman swung around. It had already fallen to around 2,000 health. However, that didn't stop it from madly charging at Nie Yan yet again.

-328

-100

-218...

The ticks of bleed and poison damage slowly stacked up, leaving the Phantom Swordsman with only 600 health.

Nie Yan quickly retreated, seeing the Phantom Swordsman getting closer and closer. As its large sword slashed down on him, his pupils suddenly shrunk.

Phantom Assassination!

Nie Yan's body blurred into many different illusory figures. He brushed past the Phantom Swordsman's blade and stabbed it in the neck with Zennarde's Sword.

Phantom Assassination: 39% Completion, 63% damage, 0 Combo
-568 The Phantom Swordsman staggered unsteadily before collapsing on the ground and disappearing into motes of light.

This was the effect of purification.

The Phantom Swordsman dropped two pieces of loot. The first was a piece of Level 50 Gold-grade Berserker equipment. Its properties weren't bad, but such an item naturally wouldn't hold Nie Yan's interest. The other was an Alchemy Recipe.

Advanced Health Potion Recipe

Requirements: Advanced Alchemist

Nie Yan was pleasantly surprised. From now on, he could use Advanced Health Potions.

Nie Yan tossed the Advanced Health Potion Recipe in his bag. The Starry Night Potion Shop already had five Advanced Alchemists. Giving the recipe to any one of them would be fine.

After putting away the loot, Nie Yan walked over to the gold treasure chest. He bent down and started opening it.

Opening Treasure Chest... Progress: 10%... 30%... 55%....

The chest popped open with a click. Nie Yan dug around and fished out two skill books.

Nie Yan examined the first book which looked somewhat shabby.

Skill Book: Fireball Downpour

Description: Bombard everything within a 20 meter radius of the targeted area with fireballs, dealing 200% magic damage. Cast Time: 10 Seconds. Cooldown: 10 minutes.

Restrictions: Arcane Mage, Elementalist

This was a decent skill for clearing away large numbers of mobs. It would be perfect to hand over to the Arcane Mages and Elementalist in the guild.

Nie Yan turned to look at the other skill book. The edges were gilded with gold, and the workmanship was excellent. It was definitely a valuable item.

Examining the cover, Nie Yan was surprised. It was actually the Thief skill book for Quick Reset.

Quick Reset was an extremely rare skill. In the previous timeline, it would appear in the marketplace once every blue moon. Back then it was something he could only hope for in his dreams.

Skill Book: Quick Reset

Description: Reduce the cooldown of one of a selected skill (excluding Advanced Skills) to 2 seconds. Cooldown: 15 minutes.

Restrictions: Thief

Nie Yan glanced at his skill bar. It was already completely full. More than 20 of his skill slots were taken up by passive skills that increased Dexterity and Strength. If he wanted to continue learning new skills, he would have to clear out some space.

The passive skills that only added 3 Dexterity or Strength were disposable to Nie Yan.

Nie Yan learned Quick Reset, then continued exploring the stronghold, using any lone mobs he encountered on the way as training dummies to practice Phantom Assassination and Reverse Grip Backstab. These two Freedom Skills were fairly difficult to get the hang of. It would be impossible for him to completely master

them any time soon.

All Freedom Skills generally required a long time to fully grasp. Nie Yan was in no rush.

Nie Yan gradually made his way to the center of the stronghold. He hid atop a 10-meter tall building, peering down at a public square up ahead. It was spacious enough to fit several thousand players, and roaming around in the center was a 6 meter-tall bear that resembled a small hill.

Nie Yan recalled hearing in the previous timeline that the final boss of the Cripps Stronghold was Level 70.

The expedition team should be arriving right about now, Nie Yan thought after checking the time. He jumped off of the building, gently landing on the ground using the Featherfall Jewel. After which he sprinted off to meet them.

When Nie Yan returned to the entrance of the Cripps Stronghold, he received word from Guo Huai that the expedition team had arrived.

Gazing far into the horizon, Nie Yan saw a large mass of players on horseback riding towards him. They stopped in the field outside the Cripps Stronghold, dismounted from their horses, and started organizing into their ranks.

Nie Yan issued out orders which were carried out immediately. Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and the others entered the Cripps Stronghold first and stood at the center of the street. With Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan tanking at the front while the Priests supported them from the rear, they started warming up by clearing away the first few Phantom Swordsmen in their path.

The other teams followed suit, entering the stronghold one after another.

Asskickers United's large movements naturally attracted the attention of other guilds, who all received the news they were

planning to capture the Cripps Stronghold. Asskickers United was perhaps the only guild right now that dared to take on an Intermediate Stronghold.

Although Victorious Return wanted to interfere, they were powerless against the might of Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine. Calore no longer belonged to them. Bloodlust Blades was too busy trying to put out the fire on their side, and Divine Protectors and Alliance of Mages were too far away. Dispatching players to Calore was simply suicidal. Asskickers United was basically invincible within Calore. Without several hundred thousand troops, it was impossible to stop them.

Under Nie Yan's command, the over 5,000 elites from Asskickers United started clearing the Cripps Stronghold.

Calore was exceptionally tranquil, with not a speck of dust being kicked up despite Asskickers United clearing the Cripps Stronghold.

At this moment, five figures stepped out of Calore's transfer point and immediately attracted the attention of the surrounding players. One of them was tall, green, and rippling with muscles, resembling a ferocious beast. This was an orc from the Satreen Empire. Another had delicate features, jade-like skin, and two long ears. It was an elf!

Chapter 379 - War Preparations

This was the first time players from the Satreen Empire had stepped foot in the Viridian Empire. Their strange appearances immediately attracted many curious gazes.

The player standing at the front of the group was the tallest among them. He had a sturdy stature, dark green skin, and was fully clad in plate armour. He held a heavy shield in one hand and a large sword in the other. A metal helmet covered most of his head, only showing his face which appeared extremely fierce.

He was an Orc Warrior!

Orcs with their innate strength were the race most suited for the Warrior class.

The orcs had given birth to many outstanding Warriors throughout history.

Standing beside the Orc Warrior was a slim player with pointy ears. He wielded two daggers and wore leather armour, signifying he was an Elven Thief. The innate cloaking ability of elves made them extremely suited for stealth.

There were three more players. One of them looked somewhat portly. He wore ash-gray robes covered in ancient charms. He was a Shaman Doctor, a frightening class that could cast healing magic and wield the power of nature. His friendly and approachable appearance made it easy for a person to lower their guard. But the sharp killing intent radiating from his eyes suggested this was only a facade.

As for the other two players, one was an Elven Mage and the other an Elven Druid.

It would be strange if this group didn't attract the attention of everyone around them. The lowest level among them was Level 51 while the highest was the Elven Mage at Level 55.

“So this is Calore, eh? It’s a lot less lively compared to our Orc King City,” the Orc Warrior remarked with a hint of disdain.

The portly Shaman Doctor gazed at the players walking up and down the street. “Don’t be so quick to judge. The map layout here is different from the Satreen Empire. Orc King City is surrounded by many Level 30–60 maps. It’s not strange the city is at the height of activity right now. All of Calore’s players are spread out over several hundred surrounding towns and villages. Even though at a glance Calore seems quiet and empty compared to Orc King City, their population is at least two times larger than ours.”

The Orc Warrior lightly grunted while the others nodded in acknowledgement. Although they each had their pride, they showed respect to the Shaman Doctor. It appeared this portly player was the de facto leader of the group.

“Flying Cat, I heard you have a classmate in Victorious Return. Why don’t you call them over to show us around? I have no problem compensating them for their time,” the Shaman Doctor said. They were travellers in an unfamiliar city. It would be best if they found a guide.

Flying Cat, who was the Elven Thief, thought for a moment before nodding in understanding. “Alright, I’ll get in touch with him.”

“Love Guru, do you know when the Elite Knight Corps are recruiting again?” the Orc Warrior casually asked as he looked around at the sights.

The Elite Knight Corps was the strongest group of Warriors in Angel Corps. They currently comprised 50 members.

“I don’t know. You’ll have to ask Angel after we return,” the Shaman Doctor replied indifferently as he looked around at the nearby shops. Their mission for coming to Calore was to gather intel on one of their potential rivals, Asskickers United. It would be great if he could bring back some useful information.

“How could I ask the guild leader?” The Orc Warrior gave a bitter smile.

“You’re a veteran member of Angel Corps. How can we help you if you’re failing to meet the mark? If you really want to join the Elite Knight Corps that badly, figure out a way to enter the top 50 first,” Love Guru said. He was a high-ranking member who held significant sway in Angel Corps.

The Orc Warrior was the weakest in the group. The rest of them all ranked within the top 100 of Angel Corps. Love Guru was ranked 7th, but his influence was only second to Soaring Angel. His connections were deep. Angel Corps wouldn’t be what it was today without him.

“Give me a break! All those players in the top 50 are a bunch of freaks! It would be easier to scale Mt. Everest!” the Orc Warrior exclaimed dejectedly. Back when Angel Corps was running around in other virtual reality games, he had always been in the top 50. But things changed after entering Conviction. Angel Corps had gotten ahead of the competition and secured a lion’s share of the real-estate market in Orc King City. They received the support of two giant companies and later on the favour of the Century Financial Group. Their popularity soared overnight, with a large number of new recruits joining every day. After crushing all the other guilds in Orc King City beneath their feet, they stood at the top unrivalled. The Orc Warrior gave it his all, competing with the galaxy of talent in the guild, but gradually lost his top 50 ranking. Due to him being a long-standing member, he could still run dungeons with Love Guru and the other veteran members frequently. But his ranking in Angel Corps had already dropped down to the top 700.

Love Guru laughed and comforted the Orc Warrior. “You’re a veteran member of Fallen Angel. All of us know how many years you’ve toiled for the guild. As long as the guild stands, you will never be mistreated. But you also need to shape up. It would be

shameful if we veterans lose to those new recruits. We're eventually going to control the entire Satreen Empire and even expand into the Viridian Empire. You better be there too! Don't fall behind."

"Yes, Love Guru!" The Orc Warrior nodded emotionally.

Love Guru and his group visited the Starry Night Potion Shop, the several auction houses in Calore, and a few NPCs. All the while Love Guru was carrying out his mission as he recorded down any information related to Asskickers United that entered his ears.

...

Cripps Stronghold. Asskickers United's arrival destroyed the tranquility of this place. There were players on every street, clearing away the Phantom Swordsmen, as they slowly pressed forward.

Nie Yan led a group of 500 players through the main street as he advanced toward the heart of the Cripps Stronghold. Only now did he truly understand the strength of numbers!

All Nie Yan had to do was pass down an order whenever they encountered an elite, and a shower of spells would rain down from the sky, blasting the enemy into smithereens. Although some accidents occurred, such as Phantom Swordsmen managing to reach their backline and slaughtering the Mages, they were quickly dealt with.

Thanks to the large number of Priests with Revive, their losses were greatly reduced. At most players who died would lose a bit of experience.

Nie Yan spotted a giant creature in a plaza up ahead.

Black Mammoth (Lord): Level 50

Health: 230,000/230,000

This Black Mammoth stood over four meters tall. Taking on a

level 50 Lord directly was extremely difficult. This was a flat plaza, there were no environmental obstacles to take advantage of. All they could do was allow the Fighters to tank it head on. This Black Mammoth was also guarded by more than 60 Phantom Swordsmen. Before dealing with the Black Mammoth, they would have to clear out the Phantom Swordsmen first.

“Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, Yi Yan, take the right flank. Listen to my command, charge straight for the Black Mammoth. Young Seven, Painted Muslin, Heaven, each of you will be supporting one of them. Don’t let them die!” Nie Yan examined how the Phantom Swordsmen were spread out and immediately passed down his orders.

“Isn’t that too dangerous?” Young Seven asked worriedly. He was the cautious type that preferred to minimize risk. In his mind it was too risky to face the Black Mammoth without first clearing away the Phantom Swordsmen. If Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan were surrounded, it wouldn’t matter how many Priests there were to heal them.

“It’s fine, I have a plan. Who here can cast Frost Rain?” Nie Yan asked the Elementalists.

“I can,” Lustboy answered. Today was his first time seeing Nie Yan in person. Before this he had only seen him in videos. He couldn’t help but bubble with excitement.

Nie Yan glanced at Lustboy who looked to be around 18 years old. It was amazing such a youth could enter the top ranks of Asskickers United. In the entire guild perhaps only Sun was younger than him.

“I can also cast Frost Rain,” Undying Scoundrel said. Even though Frost Rain dealt pitiful damage, its ability to slow the enemy to a crawl was highly valued by top-ranking players.

Two players with Frost Rain, it was enough.

Seeing Nie Yan asking for players who could cast Frost Rain, Young Seven faintly smiled. He finally understood the plan.

Nie Yan had planned everything out step by step. He stationed the players who could cast area-of-effect spells in suitable vantage points.

After finishing his preparations, Nie Yan turned to Bladelight and the others. “You guys can start now. Be careful. We’ll provide cover fire for you. You must reach the Black Mammoth and secure its aggro at all costs.”

Bladelight chuckled and gave a thumbs up. He was completely confident.

These teammates were all outstanding players. All Nie Yan had to do was explain once and they would immediately understand his thoughts. On top of this, they weren’t afraid to raise their concerns and share their opinions. As for teamwork, they were always running dungeons together, so there was no problem in that respect.

“Alright, let’s begin,” Nie Yan ordered.

Before long, the players all got into position. Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan drank Invisibility Potions and started heading towards the Black Mammoth.

Seeing them leave, Nie Yan gave his orders. Looking around, all the Mages who could cast area-of-effect magic were in position and had finished their preparations.

Chapter 380 - Coordination

Bladelight and the others arrived at their designated positions. Three Phantom Swordsmen barred their path to the Dark Mammoth.

Undying Scoundrel and Lustboy were also on standby.

Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan awaited their orders as they looked over in Nie Yan's direction.

After confirming everyone was ready, Nie Yan gave the signal. Several silhouettes burst into action and rushed toward the Black Mammoth.

Charge!

Charge!

Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan were like arrows loosed from their bows and aimed directly at the Black Mammoth.

The nearby Phantom Swordsmen immediately moved to surround them!

“Scoundrel, Lustboy, now!” Nie Yan exclaimed.

Undying Scoundrel and Lustboy raised their staffs and started chanting a series of incantations as the surrounding temperature rapidly plummeted.

Frost Rain had a cast time of roughly 10 seconds. A group of Phantom Swordsmen in the distance noticed the magic fluctuations and started rushing towards the source.

“Warriors, stop them!”

Edgeless, Monochrome, and several other Warriors charged forward and intercepted the Phantom Swordsmen, blocking them from advancing by even half-a-step.

Meanwhile, Bladelight and the other two had charged through

one Phantom Swordsmen after another and arrived in front of the Black Mammoth.

“Shield Bash!” Bladelight bellowed, slamming his heavy shield into the Black Mammoth with a loud klang!

Staggering several steps back, the Black Mammoth let out an angry roar and charged at Bladelight.

Defense Stance!

Bladelight dug his feet into the ground and braced both arms against his shield.

A loud metallic klang rang out like a clap of thunder as the Black Mammoth rammed into the shield and shoved Bladelight back several meters before stopping.

Bladelight stood firm as a boulder, even with the Black Mammoth’s aggro fully focused on him.

Young Seven hurriedly healed Bladelight and cast a damage absorbing shield on him.

Bladelight held the Black Mammoth’s attention while Lofty Shadow and Yi Yan guarded his flanks.

Almost 40 Phantom Swordsmen closed in on the three of them from all directions. They felt their scalps go numb. With so many Level 50 Elites surrounding them, they were basically sitting ducks. It wouldn’t matter how tanky they were since the enemy AI was capable of chaining crowd control effects.

“Don’t attack! Don’t unnecessarily generate aggro!” Bladelight hollered in a tense tone. He couldn’t help but wonder if Nie Yan’s plan was really viable. As long as they didn’t attack, the others could draw these Phantom Swordsmen away.

At this moment, Undying Scoundrel and Lustboy finished chanting the last syllable. A dense mist of ice descended on the area, plummeting the surrounding temperature below zero. A

downpour of hail and sleet followed.

Ice crystals bloomed everywhere accompanied by the sound of pitter-pattering on the ground.

Everything within the range of the Frost Rain was pelted with ice. Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan were no exception.

-130

-130

-130...

A string of damage values floated up above their heads. They looked like frozen ice sculptures, their movements greatly hindered.

Frost Rain wasn't a high-damage spell, but its slowing effect was potent.

Young Seven, Painted Muslin, and Black Heaven immediately increased their efforts in healing Bladelight's group, preserving their health above 80%.

The Phantom Swordsmen were a step away from surrounding and attacking Bladelight's group. But when the Frost Rain descended their movements slowed to a crawl, and under the constant peppering their aggro finally shifted onto Undying Scoundrel and Lustboy.

Bladelight continuously attacked the Black Mammoth with his sword and shield. He didn't dare to use skills like Demoralizing Shout and Taunt for fear of aggroing the nearby Phantom Swordsmen.

Bladelight remained unyielding in the face of the Black Mammoth's unrelenting assault. He had the best defensive gear in Asskickers United. So long as the healing kept up, let alone a Level 50 Black Mammoth even a Level 80 Lord couldn't faze him.

The Phantom Swordsmen moved to surround Undying

Scoundrel and Lustboy.

“Mages, let loose your area-of-effect magic 20 meters ahead!” Nie Yan ordered. All the Mages started chanting their spells.

When the Phantom Swordsmen arrived in the designated area, Nie Yan activated an Advanced Twisting Vines Scroll as giant tendrils shot out of the ground and bound the Phantom Swordsmen in place.

The Phantom Swordsmen wildly struggled and thrashed about, but their restraints showed no signs of loosening.

The Mages finished chanting as fire, lightning, and ice poured down from the sky creating a cacophony of destruction. No one could count how many area-of-effect spells were layered on top of one another. But such a violent bombardment would surely leave no survivors!

The Phantom Swordsmen collapsed in droves. Not a single one was left alive!

The barrage of area-of-effect magic finally subsided about 12 seconds later, revealing a scene of utter carnage. The ground was littered with the corpses of Phantom Swordsmen with the glitter of loot sparkling in between.

The surrounding players gazed at Nie Yan in awe. For him to have achieved his current success absolutely wasn't through sheer coincidence and luck. From calling forth the Frost Rain, to the activation of Twisting Vines and the bombardment of area-of-effect spells, all of it took place in the span of roughly two minutes, the timing of every move counted to perfection.

“Everyone, focus on the boss!” Nie Yan commanded. The several hundred players behind rushed toward the Black Mammoth.

A group of Warriors rushed forward and surrounded the Black Mammoth, hindering its movements greatly. It furiously bellowed and attempted to break free of the encirclement. But its struggling

was futile.

Bladelight immediately felt the burden on his back lessen greatly.

The Mages in the rear spread out and bombarded the Black Mammoth with magic.

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」Spells rained down on the Black Mammoth. Explosions of flames and lightning flew out everywhere.

A string of damage values floated up above the Black Mammoth's head.

About a minute later, the Black Mammoth's health dipped below 20%. Its entire body started glowing red. Letting out a thunderous roar, it slammed into Bladelight with its long tusks and ruthlessly sent him flying.

Its tusk had also sent six others flying away, immediately opening up some space.

The Black Mammoth charged out of the encirclement, crushing six Warriors to death in the process.

Besides the Fighters, no one else could stop the berserk Black Mammoth!

Seeing that the Mages in the rear were in danger, Lofty Shadow rushed forward and struck out with a Shield Bash before hunkering down in front of the Black Mammoth.

Lofty Shadow was like a boulder barring the Black Mammoth's path forward. It let out an angry roar and whipped its trunk at him.

「Bang!」Lofty Shadow was sent flying like a loose kite.

Young Seven, Painted Muslin, and Black Heaven were frantically providing support. When Bladelight was sent flying, they immediately healed him. Seeing Lofty Shadow get knocked away too, they rushed to heal him. Before they even hit the ground, their health was restored to full!

The healing meant there was no pressure!

Be it Young Seven, Painted Muslin, or Black Heaven, any one of them was a first class healer. Their reaction speeds were top-notch. A Priest's worth was based on how quickly they could respond with their eyes and hands. So long as the Heals, Dispel, and so on were timely, everything was fine.

Most teams only had one Main Healer on the account of excellent Priests being hard to come by. But Nie Yan's group had three Priests who could play the role in the form of Young Seven, Painted Muslin, and Black Heaven. As long as they were around, anyone not instantly killed by the Black Mammoth could be brought back to full health in no time!

Such Priests greatly reduced the risk of wiping. Their prompt healing would transform any Warrior into an undying cockroach!

Just as Lofty Shadow was sent flying, a full health Bladelight jumped in to take his place.

Chapter 381 - Magic Tower

Bladelight and Yi Yan worked together to lock down the Black Mammoth. It bellowed furiously but all of its struggling was futile.

Since the Fighters were coordinating perfectly and the Priests had no trouble keeping up with the healing, the Mages could let loose without worry. Tang Yao in particular was firing out spells like a gatling gun and dealing an astonishing amount of damage.

Nie Yan was thoroughly impressed. This sort of team was practically unrivalled. He couldn't help but recall his experiences in the previous timeline, where Fighters would fail to properly secure the boss' aggro, Mages would carelessly generate too much aggro, and Priests would fail to keep up the healing when the boss went berserk. All of these scenarios would lead to a wipe. It would take five or six attempts to defeat a Lord-class boss on a good day.

However, this team was making it look like child's play!

About half a minute later, the Black Mammoth bellowed out mournfully before crashing down to the ground.

Flawless!

Nie Yan gazed at the 11 corpses scattered on the ground, all of which were Warriors and Thieves who had been instantly killed by the Black Mammoth.

"Priests, start reviving the fallen. Everyone else, rest up!" Nie Yan ordered as he walked toward the Black Mammoth's corpse.

Bladelight picked up a total of five pieces of equipment. It was a huge harvest.

"Find anything good?" Nie Yan asked. He was looking forward to seeing what kind of loot the Black Mammoth dropped since the drop rates were much higher than normal when capturing a stronghold.

“Yeah, take a look,” Bladelight replied with a smile, then shared the drops in chat.

As Nie Yan scanned through the pieces of loot, a greatshield caught his eye. It was rectangular in shape and covered in mysterious runes.

Mammoth Greatshield (Sub Legendary)

Requirements: 520 Strength

Properties: Defense 1293–1392, 57% Block Rate, Shield Bash Level +2, Demoralizing Shout Level +1, Damage -10%, Magic Resist +50

Greatshield Bash: Bash the enemy with your greatshield for 120% damage, and generates additional aggro. Cooldown: 60 seconds.

Restrictions: Fighter

This Mammoth Greatshield was worth well over 10,000 gold. No one expected such a superb shield to drop from the Level 50 Lord-class Black Mammoth. The supplementary skill, Greatshield Bash, was especially useful for Fighters whose main role was to secure aggro. It could greatly reduce the risk of wiping to a boss.

The Mammoth Greatshield was undoubtedly a piece of top-quality Fighter equipment. It would naturally be given to the best Fighter in the guild.

“Are you satisfied with the shield you have right now?” Nie Yan asked. He recalled Bladelight was using a Dark Gold-grade shield.

“Although my current shield is a bit worse than the Mammoth Greatshield, it’s part of the Everlasting Dark Gold Set. I’ll lose out on some important set bonuses if I switch it out, so I don’t think the trade-off is worth it,” Bladelight considered. “Give the Mammoth Greatshield to Lofty Shadow. He just so happens to be lacking a good shield. It’ll put him roughly on par with me in terms of tankiness.”

Needless to say the competition between Fighters in any guild

was fierce. The position of Main Tank was especially coveted since they received priority on Fighter equipment. It wasn't strange for Fighters to end up bruised and battered striving for this goal. Some of them for the sake of hindering their rivals would even go so far as to snatch away equipment they didn't need. However, Bladelight wasn't blinded by greed and selflessly gave the Mammoth Greatshield to Lofty Shadow.

"This Mammoth Greatshield is too important. There's no way I can accept!" Lofty Shadow hurriedly refused. He was deeply moved by Bladelight's kind gesture. This was a Sub Legendary greatshield, the only one of its kind in Asskickers United!

Lofty Shadow was an outstanding Fighter, and only second to Bladelight in terms of importance to Asskickers United. During the battle with the Black Mammoth he had saved everyone from a potential crisis when Bladelight was sent flying back.

"Don't be modest, Shadow. You've definitely earned it," Nie Yan said. After giving it some thought, he believed Lofty Shadow was indeed the most suitable candidate to receive the Mammoth Greatshield.

Fighters generally didn't get a final say on what equipment they wore, so Lofty Shadow had no choice but to accept the Mammoth Greatshield for the benefit of the guild.

The other four pieces of equipment were all Dark Gold-grade.

Nie Yan's group slowly recuperated. The fallen comrades were being revived, and the others were recovering their health.

The other groups were still busy clearing away the Phantom Swordsmen on their streets.

While Nie Yan sat to the side waiting for everyone to finish resting, he received word from Guo Huai that several players from Angel Corps had arrived in Calore. They were probably doing a quest since they were spotted talking to several NPCs.

「Keep an eye on them. Find out what quest they're doing,」Nie Yan said. These five players were probably doing an extremely important quest; otherwise, they wouldn't have come all the way to Calore. The cost of teleporting from the Satreen Empire to the Viridian Empire was 500 gold per person. A round trip for five players would instantly eat up 5,000 gold, so the reward to whatever quest they were doing had to be worth at least this much.

「I've already dispatched people to monitor them. They probably understand Calore is our domain. Trying to be sneaky under our watch is impossible,」Guo Huai said. He had everything under control.

Given only five players had come, they could at most make some discreet inquiries. There was nothing for Asskickers United to fear.

「One other thing, Radiant Sacred Flame has agreed to a buyout. This is the contract we drafted up after our talks. Take a look and let me know if you want to change anything.」

Radiant Sacred Flame had agreed to transferring over a 60% stake of their guild. This was good news.

「We don't have any surplus funds to invest into Radiant Sacred Flame right now,」Nie Yan said. He couldn't afford to squander his gold, or else it would be troublesome if they found themselves short on funds again.

「They've agreed to putting off the gold investment until the matter with Bloodlust Blades has concluded. As for the money investment, we can start right away. They've requested a subsidy of ¥5,000 a month per player for up to 500 players.」

「That's fine with me,」Nie Yan replied. After all, Radiant Sacred Flame was in control of two Basic Strongholds. He could receive the funds for the investment by selling the real world business districts to the Dragonsoar Financial Group, or he could just hand them over to the War God Tribe and let Ah Chen send people over to handle the matter. Then, the money he earned wouldn't be

limited to only this.

Nie Yan looked over the contract. It was pretty much identical to the one with Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine. After confirming there were no issues, he signed his name.

Before long, a 60% stake of Radiant Sacred Flames was transferred over to him by the system. With no one the wiser, Radiant Sacred Flame had switched sides.

Like this, the hostile relationship between Radiant Sacred Flame and Asskickers United finally came to an end. In the best interests of everyone, all past grievances vanished like a wisp of smoke.

Nie Yan's train of thought didn't end here. To the outside world Radiant Sacred Flame and Asskickers United are still sworn enemies. I wonder if I can make use of this somehow...

Nie Yan's lips curved into a faint smile.「Tell Radiant Sacred Flame not to announce they've been acquired by us! This information has to be kept under tight lock! It'll be as if nothing has changed!」

「Huh? Why?」Guo Huai asked in confusion before a light bulb suddenly lit up in his head.「Alright, I understand. Don't worry, I'll make sure nothing gets out.」

Radiant Sacred Flame was an enemy of Asskickers United. An enemy of an enemy was a friend. Guilds like Alliance of Mages and Divine Protectors might try to recruit them in the future. At that time, Radiant Sacred Flame could display their worth!

Were it not for Nie Yan, Guo Huai would've never thought of this!

At the behest of Guo Huai, Nightbreak Trickster didn't announce the alliance between Radiant Sacred Flame and Asskickers United. As for the guild members receiving salaries, he simply told them he was paying out of his own pocket. To the outside world nothing had changed.

The pitfall was set. Now all that remained was to see who would fall into it.

For the time being all of Asskickers United's energy was focused on clearing the Cripps Stronghold.

The group members finally started getting up one after another, their health fully recovered.

"Alright, let's continue advancing to the center of the stronghold!" Nie Yan said.

The players quickly found their companions and reorganized back into their respective squads before setting off.

Many ancient and mysterious buildings lined both sides of the main street. Nie Yan's gaze fell on a stone tower poking into the sky up ahead. Standing almost 60 meters tall with six floors, it was in much better shape than the surrounding buildings. A rainbow-coloured radiance swirled around the top floor and brought an even greater sense of awe to those who caught sight of it.

This was a Magic Tower, a place where Mages could study advanced magical knowledge. It was rumoured that each one was protected by a powerful guardian.

Chapter 382 - Reward Building

There were numerous buildings in the vicinity, with the Magic Tower being the tallest and most conspicuous.

When a Mage completed their class advancement, they were eligible to learn at least one Advanced Magic from a Magic Tower. They could also study different types of magic here.

The vast majority of Great Mages would choose to discard many of their old spells after entering the Magic Tower and elect to learn new ones based on their needs.

Magic Towers generally contained thousands of spells, so most Great Mages would come out completely different from before.

It was rumoured there were a total of 10 Magic Towers in the Viridian Empire. Three were located in the Remote Tundra, Sea of Endless Perils, and Wild Marsh, and were home to countless powerful spells. Two were fairly close to each other in Calore and Nisode. But they only held around 600 spells, and the most common ones at that.

The locations of the remaining five Magic Towers had remained a mystery for quite a while in the previous timeline. It wasn't until later on that the one in the Cripps Stronghold was discovered. But it was controlled by Victorious Return, and only their guild members were permitted access. If outsiders wanted to enter, not only would they have to be on friendly terms with Victorious Return, they would also have to pay an entry fee of 6,000 gold.

The Magic Towers in Calore and Nisode were too lacking. When players heard the Cripps Stronghold had a Magic Tower, they rushed over one after another. Even if they had to spend a bit of gold, the spells inside were well worth the cost of admission!

Magic Towers generally didn't collapse due to the passing of time because they were protected by a powerful magic formation. Even

if the Cripps Stronghold was destroyed, this Magic Tower would still be standing tall.

So long as Asskickers United maintained ownership of the Cripps Stronghold, this Magic Tower would become a strategic resource of theirs!

This Magic Tower was a reward for capturing the Cripps Stronghold. The Intermediate Strongholds near Nisode, Moonlight City, and the other cities also had similar buildings as a reward, such as a Warrior Arena, Priest Prayer Hall, Paladin Holy Shrine, or Thief Hideout.

“Our Mages are really lucky,” Nie Yan said. A Magic Tower would serve as a great boon to the Mages of Asskickers United.

Intermediate was the highest rank stronghold Victorious Return had captured in the previous timeline. At Level 100 they had once attempted to capture an Advanced Stronghold but were annihilated. After that, they never tried again. The Buried History expansion was released much earlier in this timeline, so there were bound to be some changes.

Needless to say the Cripps Stronghold was crucial to the growth of Asskickers United. Its geographical location also contributed to its importance, since it was surrounded by four allied strongholds. Travel between any of them would only take 20 minutes. It would become the anchor that held everything together and facilitate the quick mobilization of troops.

If they succeeded, Nie Yan would definitely relocate the main guild headquarters to the Cripps Stronghold and make it Asskickers United’s new homebase.

Of the four strongholds, one belonged to Asskickers United, two to Holy Empire, and one to Sapphire Shrine. With the Cripps Stronghold guarded at the center, the region would be impenetrable.

The Magic Tower's importance was unquestioned. Asskickers United would naturally exploit it to its full potential.

Nie Yan approached the Magic Tower, only to be stopped by a faint screen of light. When he tried touching it, he felt a strong repelling force.

A bluestone path led straight to the entrance. The magic energy in the air was dead still, making the ash-gray tower look deep and tranquil.

Only Great Mages are allowed to enter.

Nie Yan turned his head and said, "Those of you who've succeeded your class advancement, feel free to check out this Magic Tower."

Lustboy, Summer Bug, and Sunny South had all successfully advanced to Great Mages, so they were allowed to enter the tower.

"Boss, we're going in to take a look."

The three walked up to the barrier. They reached out and felt their hands easily pass through the screen of light. Stepping onto the bluestone path, they started walking towards the entrance of the Magic Tower. If they could successfully study the spells inside, they would come out much stronger than before.

After the three of them entered the Magic Tower, everyone else continued clearing away the mobs in the stronghold.

Nie Yan was quite relaxed. Bladelight and the others didn't even need him to give orders to do their jobs.

At this moment, Guo Huai reported to Nie Yan that the people he had assigned to watch over the five players from Angel Corps had lost sight of the Elven Thief.

Thieves had various skills allowing them to enter stealth, so a skilled one could easily throw off any trackers.

Guo Huai had been extremely diligent in tracking the five

visitors. Only the slippery Thief managed to escape his clutches.

What did Angel Corps intend to do with just one Thief?

“Does he want to rush over to interfere with your attack on the Cripps Stronghold?”

“Even if he is, it doesn’t matter. It’s just an Elven Thief,” Nie Yan replied. With so many of Asskickers United’s elites present, a single Thief couldn’t make many waves.

“Hopefully it’s nothing.” Despite his optimistic words, Guo Huai felt a twinge of unease.

Nie Yan smirked. He was confident in his abilities and had the skill to back it up. He obviously wouldn’t fret over something so small.

The team methodically advanced until they reached an open plaza. There, they saw several thousand Phantom Swordsmen patrolling around. In the center stood a gigantic bear that resembled a walking fortress.

Everyone sucked in a sharp breath. It was the Level 70 Variant Lord, Blackett Grizzly!

Victorious Return and Radiant Sacred Flame had wiped countless times trying to take down Blackett Grizzly and accumulated unimaginable casualties. It was only later on when they figured out a trick to deal with it that they finally took this big lug of a bear down.

The Blackett Grizzly had a special ability that allowed it to absorb health from any corpse nearby. Before it could use its Corpse Eater ability, it was vital the corpses were cleared from the plaza, even at the cost of levels. The fallen would have to revive at the cemetery and rush back to rejoin the fight.

The Blackett Grizzly also had a skill called Dark Roar that dealt damage to all nearby enemies. Warriors with their high health and defense could survive the attack, but any Mage standing within a

100 meter radius would be instantly killed! Priests were a bit better off since they could cast Radiant Barrier on themselves to mitigate some of the damage.

Its last skill was called Dark Burgeoning, which dealt continuous damage to all enemies within a 30 meter radius. During this time, it was important the main tanks were protected by the Paladin's Repel Evil or else their deaths were guaranteed. As for the other Warriors, they would have to be sacrificed and replaced by a new batch of frontliners; otherwise, the main tanks couldn't possibly hold off the Blackett Grizzly. A large amount of cannon fodder was required for them to survive.

In the previous timeline, in order to show off their achievement, Victorious Return released the video of their almost 7,000 players taking down the Blackett Grizzly. Nie Yan had seen the video and memorized how the battle went.

Back then, the Blackett Grizzly had dropped three pieces of Sub Legendary-grade equipment after being defeated. Their properties were shared online, causing players to gasp in awe and envy, Nie Yan included. But in this life they were merely interesting trinkets. After all, his current set of gear was even better, and was already viewed as godly equipment by the players.

Nie Yan looked around. The public square was surrounded by rows of buildings. Most of them were short, with only five or six being relatively tall.

It was important they cleared away all the Phantom Swordsmen in the vicinity of the Blackett Grizzly first!

“Mages, get on the roofs of the buildings!” Nie Yan ordered.

The Mages made their way to the top of the buildings by using the stairs where possible or by relying on special items. Those who didn't possess such items would be helped up by their peers. Mages had a skill called Rescue which allowed them to teleport an ally in danger to their side. But it could also be used in other ways like

right now.

All the Mages were spread out across the rooftops of the surrounding buildings.

“Sun, One Strike Vow, follow me to aggro the mobs. Everyone else, wait here,” Nie Yan said, then proceeded to explain his plan to them. With their help, aggroing the Phantom Swordsmen would be easy.

The three Thieves dashed out in different directions.

Nie Yan arrived in the middle of an open area. Taking out his Cavalry Crossbow, he fired out bolts at all the nearby Phantom Swordsmen, aggroing almost 300 of them onto him.

Nie Yan quickly turned tail and fled with the Phantom Swordsmen in hot pursuit. All of them activated Charge, brandishing their swords as they chased after him.

Phantom Swordsmen were difficult to deal with. If they were allowed to get too close, they would use all sorts of crowd control skills. Thankfully, Nie Yan was quite fast.

Before long, the first group of Phantom Swordsmen was brought to the designated location, whereupon a barrage of spells rained down from the sky, wreaking havoc and destruction. Nie Yan used Gale Step to avoid taking damage. He quickly retreated out of the combat zone and hopped over a short wall.

Under the dense shower of magic, the Phantom Swordsmen let out mournful cries before collapsing on the ground one after another.

The heavy deluge of area-of-effect magic completely shrouded their vision. About half a minute later when the smoke and dust settled, a scene of destruction with corpses strewn everywhere, along with the sparkle of loot entered their eyes. There were only a few Phantom Swordsmen at the edge of the bombardment that managed to survive.

Chapter 383 - Blackett Grizzly

The Mages finished off the surviving few Phantom Swordsmen with single-target spells. After which the Thieves ran up to collect the loot. Asskickers United sorely lacked Level 50 equipment. With all the players hitting Level 50, there simply wasn't enough to go around.

In that sense, the Cripps Stronghold was a treasure trove. Level 50 Elites were rare in other places and difficult to deal with. It was impossible to hunt them in large numbers elsewhere like they were doing right now!

After the area-of-effect magic fell, Level 50 equipment littered the ground.

Level 50 equipment was currently extremely expensive in the marketplace due to the short supply and high demand. Every day numerous groups of Level 40+ players set out to high level maps in hopes of finding decent equipment. Of course most of the equipment they found was White or Bronze-grade.

Nie Yan's group had really hit it big this time by killing all these Phantom Swordsmen.

They slowly cleared away the Phantom Swordsmen in the area. After a while, Lustboy, Sunny South, and Summer Bug reported they had left the Magic Tower. They had replaced many of their old spells with brand new ones.

Nie Yan returned to base camp just in time to see the three of them arrive.

"How was it? Learn anything good?" Nie Yan asked before having them share their skill lists. If the new spells didn't work out, they could just relearn their old ones but for a fee.

"Learning new skills is expensive. I watched 600 gold go down the drain in an instant." Lustboy chuckled bitterly. But he couldn't

deny every spell was worth the price.

The Magic Tower in the Cripps Stronghold contained more than 1,000 spells, many of which were of decent quality.

Lustboy had only recently joined the ranks of top players. He didn't have much gold saved up, unlike Summer Bug or Sunny South who wouldn't bat an eyelid over several hundred gold.

"Talk to Guo Huai, and he'll reimburse you guys," Nie Yan said. He would spare no expense to provide for these top players. They were the future pillars of Asskickers United, so they were worth the investment.

Nie Yan listened to Sunny South, Lustboy, and Summer Bug describe the Magic Tower.

"The Magic Tower has a total of six floors. We could only enter the first and second floor. There were rows of bookshelves packed with thick and heavy books. There were many books that described magic and also many ones about history. The administrator of the Magic Tower is an Old Scholar. He's in charge of passing down the skills. As long as you give him the appropriate amount of gold, he'll give you access to the spells."

Nie Yan skimmed through Lustboy's skill list. He had learned over 30 spells: Ice Rend, Freeze, Exploding Ice Bullet, Icicle, Ice Spike...

It appeared Lustboy was walking down the path of an Elementalist who specialised in Ice Magic. Nie Yan noticed these spells were all of the most basic kind and shared similar characteristics: short cast times, quick cast speeds, and crowd control.

Nie Yan glanced at Lustboy. It seemed he had some unique ideas.

Such a combination of spells would be effective in both PvP and PvE, granted the player could utilize them properly.

"Lustboy, I like what you're going for, but you're lacking

damage. After locking the opponent down, you should immediately follow up with high burst damage; otherwise, you're giving them the chance to turn the tables on you," Nie Yan gave his two cents.

Lustboy scratched the back of his head in embarrassment. "I only had enough gold for these spells. The high damage ones were too expensive."

"So that's why. No worries, just talk to Guo Huai. The guild will naturally foot the bill. You're a contracted player, after all." Nie Yan smiled. Only now did he recall there would be many other members class advancing in the near future and they would all need to learn new skills too. The expenses just kept piling up. After all, Asskickers United had more than 60,000 players in total! Besides smuggling equipment from the Underworld, he had to expand to other areas of business. He could try capturing a few more strongholds. After developing them, the gold generated should be enough to support the guild.

Nie Yan checked the skill lists of Sunny South and Summer Bug. They too were walking down their own unique paths. Sunny South was a Great Holy Mage. All the spells he learned focused on high damage, which usually came along with long cast times and high skill requirements. Spells with long cast times could easily be interrupted by others. The caster had to have good judgement, awareness, and grasp of timing.

As for Summer Bug, this fellow was far off the beaten path. He was actually learning Shadow Arcane Magic; no crowd control, no high damage, only additional shadow corrosion damage. It behaved similarly to a curse, corroding the enemy's defense and health. The longer a battle lasted, the more the shadow corrosion damage would accumulate.

Any build was viable as long as you knew how to play to its strengths.

There was no weak skill or weak class, only a weak player.

Mages would become incredibly powerful after visiting a Magic Tower. Even Nie Yan would feel wary encountering such a foe.

These several players all had their unique playstyles and understood their own skills better than anyone else. Not to mention they were famous figures in the previous timeline. Nie Yan could only rely on his experience to give a word of advice here and there.

When they matured and familiarized themselves with their respective skills, Nie Yan wanted to try challenging them in PvP. In the previous timeline, he was definitely no match for existences like Sunny South, Lustboy, and Summer Bug. But in this life, he had long since surpassed his previous limits.

Nie Yan had an almost 10 year lead on them in terms of game experience, so it was only natural he was superior. But as time passed, they would slowly catch up to him and likely surpass him one day.

Nie Yan continued to aggro mobs after the Mages on the rooftops had their area-of-effect spells come back off cooldown.

After roughly three hours, all the Phantom Swordsmen near the plaza were cleared away.

The only monster remaining in the public square was the Blackett Grizzly. When Nie Yan, Sun, and One Strike Vow were aggroing mobs, they had drawn its attention multiple times. Thankfully, they were fast at fleeing.

Nie Yan reorganized the troops. This public square could only hold 800 players at most. When someone died in battle, those on standby could quickly replace them.

This was where all the streets in the Cripps Stronghold intersected, so every group that finished clearing the Phantom Swordsmen in their respective routes would eventually end up

here.

“I want 100 Warriors, 300 Mages, 50 Priests, 30 Paladins, and 20 Thieves!” Nie Yan said. He allowed Smoke Stub, Bladelight, and the others to help with the selection.

500 players were going to be at the front. If there was enough space at the back, adding a few more Mages wouldn't hurt.

Finally the group of 500 entered the public square.

Bladelight led 20 of the best Fighters in Asskickers United in surrounding the Blackett Grizzly.

The Blackett Grizzly quickly noticed the approach of Bladelight's group. It let out a thunderous roar that shook the earth.

Bladelight advanced step by step, slowly approaching the Blackett Grizzly. The surrounding Warriors were also circling in.

The Mages had already spread out and gotten into position. They were waiting for Bladelight and the others to secure the Blackett Grizzly's aggro.

When Bladelight and his group approached within 15 meters of the Blackett Grizzly, they had already encroached on its limit of patience. It let out an enraged roar and charged toward Bladelight.

Shield Bash!

A nearby Fighter rushed up from the side and ruthlessly slammed his heavy shield into the Blackett Grizzly.

「Bang!」The Fighter was sent flying like a ragdoll.

It was an instant kill!

However, he had still done enough to somewhat slow the Blackett Grizzly's charging speed.

At this moment, Bladelight bellowed out and used Taunt on the Blackett Grizzly. He stepped up to intercept the barrelling bear, requiring the combination of Shield Bash and Barbarian Strength

to stop its charge.

Seeing the Blackett Grizzly's health, Bladelight sucked in a cold breath of air. It had more than 1,000,000 health!

What a powerful Variant Lord!

After being stopped, the Blackett Grizzly swiped at Bladelight with its massive paw.

Bladelight quickly activated Defense Stance and raised his shield to block.「Klang!」He was pushed back several steps as a damage value of -1573 floated up above his head.

A gentle radiance shrouded Bladelight and immediately restored his health back to full.

Bladelight stood firm and charged forward once more.

While Bladelight and the Blackett Grizzly traded blows, the surrounding Fighters closed in. The 20 Fighters locked the Blackett Grizzly, greatly limiting its range of movement.

The Blackett Grizzly swiped with its paws, batting away any Fighter unlucky enough to get struck.

Some of the Fighters were instantly killed. The ones that weren't staggered back to their feet, and after receiving healing, they jumped back into the fray.

“Mages, attack! Those of you with high damage, make sure you don't pull aggro!” Nie Yan ordered.

The Mages who were spread out in a circle rained down magic from the sky and bombarded the Blackett Grizzly, causing a string of damage values to rise up into the air.

60% of the spells were misses while the rest did around 300-400 damage. However, the Blackett Grizzly's health regeneration was astonishing, healing for over 10,000 health a second.

After what felt like ages, the Blackett Grizzly's health finally fell by a miniscule sliver.

It wasn't surprising that Victorious Return had wiped to this Variant Lord so many times in the previous timeline.

Chapter 384 - Corpse Eater

Furiously roaring, the Blackett Grizzly swiped away with its massive paws. A Fighter was sent flying with every sweep, only to be immediately replaced by those waiting on standby in the back.

A few Thieves were also active on the battlefield. They were in charge of picking up the equipment of their fallen comrades. Every now and then they would circle round the Blackett Grizzly and attack it with skills that inflicted continuous bleed damage before immediately backing off.

Nie Yan didn't dare to join in since his high damage would lead to the Blackett Grizzly shifting aggro. He suddenly recalled seeing Threat Null in Sunny South's skill list.

Threat Null was a Holy Mage spell that nullified all aggro generated by a targeted ally for a set period of time, allowing them to dish out damage to their heart's content.

Sunny South had learned Threat Null from the Magic Tower. It was a fairly useful spell in boss fights.

"Sunny South, cast Threat Null on me!" Nie Yan ordered before circling behind the Blackett Grizzly.

Sunny South raised his staff as a ray of light shrouded Nie Yan in a faint radiance.

Nie Yan checked his status bar.

Threat Null: Your attacks and skills generate no aggro. Duration: 30 seconds.

It was more than enough time!

Backstab!

Nie Yan plunged Zennarde's Sword into the Blackett Grizzly's back. After which he ruthlessly slashed down as blood sprayed out of the gaping wound.

Eviscerate!

Assassinate!

Blast!

Nie Yan exploded out with an onslaught of high damage skills, inflicting the Blackett Grizzly with a myriad of debuffs such as bleed, burn, and poison. On top of this, his attacks also dealt additional piercing and chaos damage.

The Blackett Grizzly's thick, steel-like hide was no match for the sharp blade of Zennarde's Sword.

-1525, -425, -356

-1473, -396, -381

-1429, -372, -320....

A string of damage values floated up above the Blackett Grizzly's head.

The 30 seconds of zero aggro generation from Threat Null was extremely precious. Nie Yan wanted to make every second count!

Even though Nie Yan was doing far more damage than the players around him, the Blackett Grizzly couldn't be bothered to spare him so much as a glance.

Nie Yan looked at his damage stats and saw he had dealt over 32,000 damage in total! He immediately retreated once the 30 seconds were over, not daring to linger a second longer.

No one else in the group had an aggro removal skill. Nie Yan would have to wait 20 minutes for Threat Null to come back off cooldown.

At the back, Yao Yao gazed at the battle with a thoughtful look on her face. This sort of aggro removal skill appeared to be useful to Nie Yan. Learning Threat Null would only take up one skill slot, and the 1,000 gold fee was pocket change in her eyes.

The Corpse Eater skill of the Blackett Grizzly was frightening. It would immediately heal back to full health if there were more than five corpses nearby, making all their efforts go to waste.

The Blacket Grizzly barreled forward, sending Fighters flying. Corpses were strewn about the battlefield.

Every time the Blackett Grizzly tried to break out of the encirclement, one or two Fighters would rush forward into certain death to obstruct its charge.

These sacrifices were necessary. If Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, or Yi Yan died, the situation would turn grave fast.

The Mages never stopped bombarding the Blackett Grizzly, and the Priests never stopped providing support.

Time ticked away. After roughly 20 minutes, the Blackett Grizzly's health fell under 50%. At this moment it let out a deep roar that shook the entire plaza.

"Priests, purify the corpses on the ground! Quick!" Nie Yan hoarsely ordered. He barely gave them any time at all!

There were at least 10 corpses within range of the Blackett Grizzly.

Nie Yan had already reminded them prior, so the Priests immediately raised their staffs. The corpses were bathed in a purifying radiance and disappeared into motes of light.

The battlefield was cleared of all corpses!

Corpse Eater!

A bloody aura enveloped the Blackett Grizzly as a strong devouring force emerged in the air, but there were no corpses nearby to absorb.

The Blackett Grizzly lashed out in fury, catching a nearby Warrior off-guard and killing them instantly. Its health immediately recovered by 5%.

“Warriors, retreat. Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan, lock the boss down. Priests, protect them with Radiant Barriers. Paladins, buff them with your blessings!” Nie Yan calmly ordered. He was simply relying on the fuzzy memories of the video from his past life to command the team.

Even if this was his first time conducting a boss battle, Nie Yan couldn't show it! He was their leader and backbone. If he panicked, the entire team would fall apart!

Wiping was a common occurrence. Even if they wiped once or twice, they could simply revive and try again.

The levelling system of Conviction was interesting, only giving players allocatable stat points once every five levels. Even if the team dropped one or two levels, their overall strength wouldn't be heavily impacted. This was exactly why they could keep on going.

The duration of Corpse Eater was short. And with there being no corpses nearby, it had basically gone to waste.

Everyone wondered how Nie Yan knew about the Corpse Eater ability of the Blackett Grizzly beforehand. He simply claimed he happened to learn about it while searching for information.

There were many strange and fantastical rumours circulating around in Conviction. Sometimes they were simply interesting tidbits related to the history of the continent. Other times they were clues to quests. So, Nie Yan happening to find information related to the Blackett Grizzly was quite plausible.

“The Blackett Grizzly will activate Corpse Eater again once its health drops below 20%. Priests, pay close attention!” Nie Yan informed. The team's coordination was decent. They had breezed through the first phase of the battle without suffering heavy casualties.

Once the danger was over, the Warriors rushed back to support Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan. The three of them were

under heavy pressure facing the Blackett Grizzly alone.

After roughly 10 minutes, the Blackett Grizzly's health fell to 23%. Everyone was tensely playing their respective roles. At this moment, the Blackett Grizzly let out a deep roar, signalling the coming of something ominous. A powerful force started building up, like a volcano about to erupt.

The Priests believed the Blackett Grizzly was activating Corpse Eater again, so they quickly started purifying the corpses.

Seeing the Blackett Grizzly's movements, Nie Yan's heart tightened. It was Dark Roar!

"Mages, pull back! Get more than 100 meters away from the boss! Priests, use Radiant Barrier on yourselves!" Nie Yan commanded. The Mages had to retreat because they would be dead if they were caught in the skill. The Priests couldn't leave, or else the frontline would collapse. Thankfully Radiant Barrier could mitigate the damage of Dark Roar.

The Mages didn't dare to linger and immediately retreated.

The Priests protected themselves with Radiant Barrier as a faint membrane of light surrounded each one of them.

The Warriors had also made their preparations.

Bladelight and Lofty Shadow were locking down the Blackett Grizzly. Suddenly, it let out a heavy roar that carried a powerful sound wave attack, sweeping through everything within a 100 meter radius. A handful of Mages failed to get out of range in time and were instantly killed.

The Warriors at the front all lost around 50% of their health. The Priests protected by Radiant Barriers lost around 70%–80%. A few of the squishier ones were even killed instantly.

The Blackett Grizzly swepted away with its massive paws, sending a large group of Warriors flying and killing another ten or so of them.

Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan, who received the majority of the support, were somewhat better off. After losing half their health from the Dark Roar, they immediately received healing. When they were hit by the Blackett Grizzly's swipe, they had lost 70% of their health. However, they were still alive. The Priests immediately healed them back up to full health.

The Blackett Grizzly had decimated its surroundings!

At this moment, the Blackett Grizzly started activating Corpse Eater again!

"Priests, quickly purify the corpses!" Nie Yan anxiously yelled.

The Priests quickly started clearing away the corpses. However, it was too little too late. There were simply too many corpses. Several corpses were still on the ground by the time the Blackett Grizzly activated Corpse Eater. Its health immediately recovered back to 83%.

All the team members gazed at each other in despair. They had worked so hard to take down the Blackett Grizzly to 20%, yet now all of that effort was wiped away in an instant. If it kept doing what it just did every time it reached low health, did that mean they could never kill it?

The team had suffered a heavy blow to their morale.

At this moment, Nie Yan's voice roused everyone's spirits, "Good work, guys! We only gave the Blackett Grizzly three corpses to absorb. Let's continue. Have the Warriors on standby replace the fallen. Mages, come back! We're only getting started. The Blackett Grizzly is running low on mana. Its mana only replenishes once a day!"

Only now did everyone recall that the Blackett Grizzly had a limited mana pool. If it had an endless supply of mana, they would truly despair. However, Nie Yan just said the Blackett Grizzly's mana only replenished once a day. As long as they could force the

boss to waste all its mana, they could kill it!

They immediately regained their confidence. The Warriors rushed forward and surrounded the Blackett Grizzly. The Mages were also back in position and resumed their bombardment of magic.

They once more started gradually chipping away at the Blackett Grizzly's health.

Chapter 385 - Execution!

Another 20 minutes passed as the team whittled down the Blackett Grizzly's health.

This was the toughest boss Asskickers United had ever faced. The Warriors at the front suffered heavy losses. The backline didn't remain unscathed either. The Blackett Grizzly's Dark Roar was too hard to avoid, and although the damage wasn't high, it was more than enough to sweep away the fragile casters.

Several Priests were busily working away. They weren't tasked with healing but rather purifying the corpses scattered on the ground. They simply had to, lest they wanted the Blackett Grizzly to keep healing from Corpse Eater.

Even if levels had to be sacrificed, there was no other alternative.

Finally, the Blackett Grizzly's health had fallen to 12%.

Everyone on the battlefield felt mentally drained. The tense and strenuous battle with the Blackett Grizzly wore heavily on their nerves.

The Blackett Grizzly was still as vigorous as ever. Without warning, it charged past Resplendent Bladelight, knocking him aside and rushing towards the backline.

The Mages quickly scattered, but several of them failed to get out of the way in time. In their final moments, they watched the Blackett Grizzly's giant paws coming down on them.

The Blackett Grizzly slaughtered Mages left and right with its reckless charge, leaving a trail of corpses in its wake.

Nie Yan quickly ordered the Mages to retreat, calling for a squad of reserve Fighters to block the boss.

There were already almost 70 Mages dead on the ground. If things continued at this rate, they would be wiped out completely!

The Fighters charged up one by one to stop the boss. The Blackett Grizzly slowed down, but continued to slap every challenger into the distance.

It was useless no matter what Nie Yan did. Trying to come back from this hopeless situation was nearly impossible. He could only pray the Fighters could stop the Blackett Grizzly.

Bladelight had suffered heavy injuries. He was still in an incapacitated state after being sent flying by the Blackett Grizzly.

The Blackett Grizzly was unstoppable! No one could take even one hit!

At this moment, Lofty Shadow rushed up from the side and slammed his Mammoth Greatshield into the Blackett Grizzly.

Greatshield Bash!

Heroic Strike!

Demoralizing Shout!

Lofty Shadow let out a deep penetrating roar. He repeatedly struck the Blackett Grizzly to get its attention.「Klang!」A paw swipe sent him skidding back.

Just as the Blackett Grizzly was about to resume massacring the Mages, Lofty Shadow rushed back up with a Charge.

Taunt!

Lofty Shadow had finally attracted the Blackett Grizzly's aggro.「Klang! Klang! Klang!」It repeatedly battered his shield with savage zeal.

Lofty Shadow bought enough time for Yi Yan to catch up. Bladelight had also recovered and immediately charged back into the fray. The three of them worked together to secure the Blackett Grizzly's aggro once more. Even though it was slowly recovering its health, they weren't anxious. Eating the tofu hot would only scald the tongue. When they built up enough aggro, it would be

safe for the Mages to resume dealing damage.

The Warriors once more started encircling the Blackett Grizzly.

The Mages breathed a sigh of relief. With their lives no longer in danger, they hurried back into position.

Nie Yan also thanked his lucky stars that he had three such outstanding Fighters. Most guilds and teams would be fortunate to have one reliable main tank, who stood far above their peers whether in terms of skill or gear quality. This was why whenever the main tank encountered a mishap, there was little that could be done to salvage the situation and a wipe would become inevitable.

For ordinary guilds and teams, having so many top-ranked players gathered together was simply unimaginable.

Lofty Shadow's quick reactions had rescued the team from disaster.

After the situation was back under control, the Mages started dealing damage again.

Dark Burgeoning!

A dark aura radiated outward from the Blackett Grizzly like a blossoming lotus flower and enveloped all the surrounding Warriors.

-500

-500

-500...

A blanket of damage values rose up into the sky.

All the Warriors were shocked and hesitated mid-attack. At this moment, the Blackett Grizzly lashed out with a ground slam and sent more than 20 of them flying out, instantly killing the ones who hadn't received healing yet.

Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan received full support. A top

Priest was assigned to each of them, with at least three other backup Priests providing assistance. They were enjoying the treatment of a distinguished guest. Although Dark Burgeoning put a lot of pressure on the Priests, it wasn't to the point where they couldn't keep up with the healing. As for the Warriors who didn't enjoy this luxury, they weren't so lucky and died miserable deaths. The Priests couldn't afford to pay any heed to them.

The Priests in the back raised their staffs and started casting Heal.

“Paladins, cast Repel Evil!” Nie Yan anxiously reminded.

The Paladins quickly raised their hands and cast Repel Evil on Bladelight, Lofty Shadow, and Yi Yan.

When the 20 Warriors at the front collapsed, the reserve team quickly rushed up to replace them as they surrounded the Blackett Grizzly.

The Blackett Grizzly's health fell lower and lower. Nie Yan understood the lower the boss' health, the more dangerous it would get.

Nie Yan turned to Yao Yao beside him. “Yao Yao, start casting Radiant Fetters!”

“Alright!” Yao Yao nodded. She raised her staff and started chanting.

The Blackett Grizzly angrily roared and charged into Bladelight and the others, sending them flying out like loose kites. Its body was burning with a dark fire. It had already entered a berserk state and was wantonly slaughtering any and everyone in its vicinity.

Yao Yao finally finished chanting the last syllable. A giant ray of light descended from the sky and locked the Blackett Grizzly in place.

The Blackett Grizzly roared and struggled wildly, but it couldn't break free from the light.

Ordinary binding magic wouldn't work on the Blackett Grizzly. After all, It was a Level 70 Variant Lord. But Yao Yao's Radiant Fetters was Rank 2 Templar Magic!

Spells ruthlessly bombarded the Blackett Grizzly's body. Before long, it's health dropped to the 3% mark.

"It's below 3% health!" the Warriors exclaimed excitedly as they attempted to finish off the Blackett Grizzly.

Execution!

Execution!

A string of misses rose into the air as the skill failed numerous times. However, that didn't deter their spirits.

At this moment, Bladelight roared and slashed down with his own Execution!

-27,538!

The Blackett Grizzly let out a miserable roar, staggering unsteadily before crashing into the ground and shaking the entire public square.

Chapter 386 - Earl Kelfield's Worries

Execution was a Warrior exclusive skill that could instantly kill a target once their health fell below a certain threshold. At the higher ranks it reached upwards of 10%. But the success rate was exceedingly low against Elites and Lords.

The Blackett Grizzly dropped two pieces of Sub Legendary-grade equipment, Paddock's Blazing Sword and Langdon's Necklace of False Death.

Paddock's Blazing Sword (Sub Legendary)

Requirements: 630 Strength, 350 Dexterity

Properties: Attack 830–936, Strength +50, Critical +20, 10% chance to deal 300% Critical Damage, Ignore Level +11

Blazing Cleave: Deal 150% Fire Damage and inflict an additional 100 Burn Damage every second for 10 seconds. Cooldown: 20 minutes.

Blazing Sword: Shroud your sword in flames, converting 50% of your attack damage to Fire Damage. Duration: 3 minutes. Cooldown: 1 day.

Restrictions: Warriors; can only be equipped by members of the Righteous Faction.

Nie Yan shared the stats of Paddock's Blazing Sword in chat. "Whoever wants this sword, start bidding."

"50,000 merit points!"

"90,000 merit points!"

...

Edgeless snatched up Paddock's Blazing Sword in the end with a final bid of 610,0000 merit points, which was then evenly distributed among all the expedition members. Since there were more than 5,000 players, everyone received roughly 120 merit

points.

Nie Yan examined the other piece of Sub Legendary-grade equipment.

Langdon's Necklace of Fake Death (Sub Legendary)

Requirements: 50 Focus, 50 Willpower

Description: Langdon was a legendary Thief who faced numerous godly existences. This was his necklace, with which he escaped from countless dangers.

Properties: Defense 52–56, Night Vision +11, Dark Awareness +9, Cloaking +30, chance to nullify Mind Magic

Fake Death: Reset all aggro by entering into a state of suspended animation. This skill is only effective against creatures with low intelligence.

Restrictions: Thief; can only be equipped by a member of the Righteous Faction.

Langdon's Necklace of Fake Death was definitely one of the better necklaces out there, granting Night Vision, Dark Awareness, and a useful skill.

Nie Yan decided to keep the necklace for himself, then gave every expedition member 200 merit points.

He unequipped his Necklace of Deception and stored it in his bag until he needed it. After which he equipped Langdon's Necklace of Fake Death.

Even though the Blackett Grizzly only dropped two pieces of Sub Legendary-grade equipment, one less compared to the previous timeline, he was still satisfied with this outcome.

Nie Yan had Bladelight, Smoke Stub, and the others begin distributing the merit points. Excluding the compensation for the fallen, every member received roughly 1,000 merit points.

As the value of gold gradually depreciated, the value of merit

points rose. Currently, 100 merit points was equal to 1 gold in Asskickers United. In a sense, every member had received 10 gold.

The expedition team searched the remaining areas of the Cripps Stronghold and discovered a few more treasure chests.

Nie Yan began restoring the various structures in the Cripps Stronghold, first by connecting its transfer point to the other strongholds and Calore. The more than 10-meter tall outer walls of the stronghold sprang back to life, and were reinforced with several dozen smaller walls. He placed the guild headquarters right next to the Magic Tower and also repaired a large number of the residential houses.

The Cripps Stronghold was equivalent to a medium-sized city. With many decent levelling spots nearby, Nie Yan felt confident this place would only become more popular in the future. He designated a large stretch of land as the downtown area. He would have Bird and the others come over and start building the shops here.

As for the real world business district, Nie Yan planned to leave it to the Dragonsoar Financial Group to develop.

A guild provided salaries and other benefits to assist in their players' growth to create a force powerful enough to capture a stronghold. They would receive gold and credits by handing over the stronghold's real world business district to a large financial group. As the number of strongholds under their control increased, so too would their income. Thanks to the increased benefits they could offer, their players would grow stronger, allowing them to capture even more strongholds. This was a virtuous cycle.

After selling the Cripps Stronghold's real world business district to the Dragonsoar Financial Group, the benefits of the players in Asskickers United would rise by yet another level.

Nie Yan spent roughly 100,000 gold repairing the Cripps

Stronghold to make it look at least somewhat presentable. It was no longer the run-down ruins of before.

The players from Asskickers United started flowing into the Cripps Stronghold, instantly making the place a lot livelier.

The Cripps Stronghold had yet to open shops. The residential area was also lacking. It still needed to be improved bit by bit. However, there was currently no one in Calore capable of posing a threat to Asskickers United, so Nie Yan could take his time developing the Cripps Stronghold.

News of the Cripps Stronghold being successfully cleared spread like wildfire, along with the information of there being a Magic Tower, which greatly piqued the interest of every Mage. The Magic Tower in Calore was too lacking. The number of spells that could be learned there was low, and none of them were especially good.

Membership in Asskickers United soon became the goal of every Mage. Every one of them wished they could enter the Magic Tower in the Cripps Stronghold after finishing their class advancement.

Nie Yan placed restrictions on the Magic Tower, requiring non-guild members to pay a fee. Players from Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine only needed to pay 300 gold while ordinary players needed to pay 3,000.

As the number of class advanced Mages grew, the Magic Tower in the Cripps Stronghold would become an important source of income for Asskickers United.

After settling all of his obligations in the Cripps Stronghold, Nie Yan took a stroll around the place. The wide streets, the rows upon rows of buildings and shops, although there weren't any business set up yet, he could envision the flourishing future of this place. The Magic Tower situated at the center of the stronghold became an ever present landmark. Aside from this, branches of the Starry Night Potion Shop, Starry Night General Shop, Starry Night Equipment Shop, and so on had already been built.

As for the real-world business district, a representative from the Dragonsoar Financial Group had just arrived to handle the transaction.

Asskickers United had profited immensely from capturing the Cripps Stronghold. The players in the guild were brimming with smiles. All of them understood the significance of an Intermediate Stronghold. They had just received an announcement that the guild was planning to raise the salaries of some 2,000 long-time members to 10,000 credits, while the other members also received an increase to their benefits. This bill was being footed by the Dragonsoar Financial Group. However, this was nothing compared to the profit they would earn from the Cripps Stronghold's real world business district.

Nie Yan left the remainder of the matters related to the Cripps Stronghold to Guo Huai.

Asskickers United's success made the other large guilds in the Viridian Empire turn green with envy. Alliance of Mages and Divine Protectors also started mobilizing troops to tackle the Intermediate Strongholds in the territories of their own respective cities. Asskickers United's quick clear of the Cripps Stronghold gave them the illusion that clearing an Intermediate Stronghold was a cakewalk, a mistake they would sorely pay for in the near future.

Nie Yan checked the time. There were still two hours before the server shut down. He made plans with Xie Yao to celebrate her birthday today. She had invited many people over for her birthday party, and he naturally couldn't be absent. Given her background, the party would surely be grand.

Nie Yan glanced at his quest log.

Quest Progress: Talk to Earl Kelfield. He might have some information regarding the Tyrant Abak's Set.

The time limit on the quest was quickly running out. He had to

start it soon or it would disappear forever.

“I’ll leave the Cripps Stronghold to you guys. I need to go do a quest,” Nie Yan said to Bladelight and the others. The important work related to the Cripps Stronghold was already handled by him personally. All that was left to do was to watch over things.

“No problem. Don’t worry. With us here, there’ll be no trouble,” Bladelight assured. Everything in the Cripps Stronghold was basically settled. There were only trivial matters still in need of attention.

Nie Yan bid farewell to Bladelight and the others and teleported back to Calore to stock up on supplies.

He rode out of Calore’s northern entrance on his Faulkner Warhorse.

About half an hour north of Calore was the Marcos Mountain. Situated at the base was an ancient castle built during the Era of Shared Governance. At some point, it was bought and renovated by Earl Kelfield, who planted a beautiful garden around the walls.

Calore’s Mercenary Association gave a quest related to Earl Kelfield called ‘Earl Kelfield’s Worries’.

The description of the quest went roughly like this:

Earl Kelfield hasn’t been able to sleep peacefully for the past two months. Skeletons are frequently emerging in his garden, destroying the tranquility of his home. The earl has already lost three servants to these vile undead. Brave adventurer, are you willing to help the earl get rid of these damned skeletons?

Skeletons: 0/30

This was a fairly simple quest. However, the reward was quite generous. After completing it, the player would receive 1 gold. This was quite a lot to ordinary players.

Chapter 387 - The Earls Ancient Castle

Earl Kelfield's Worries was only a normal quest. Could its contents possibly be related to his current quest?

Nie Yan had attempted to do Earl Kelfield's Worries in the previous timeline to earn some easy money. But due to running into some trouble with Victorious Return, he had no choice but to abandon it. He never had another chance to return to it in the end.

Nie Yan could only make wild assumptions. He galloped across the plains on his Faulkner Warhorse like a gust of wind.

After passing through several maps, Nie Yan noticed a lot more players around compared to a few weeks ago, a sign that more and more people were joining Conviction.

Based on Nie Yan's memory of the previous timeline, Conviction would only continue to grow larger. It would still be popular more than 10 years from now.

A half hour trip took only 10 minutes on the Faulkner Warhorse. Nie Yan spotted the ancient castle in the distance. It resembled an impenetrable fortress, built out of stone and situated halfway atop Marcos Mountain. Even though it looked old, one could still see hints of its former glory. Near the top were openings with dark and foreboding metal cylinders sticking out. These were Magic Cannons. Crafted by the elves, they possessed incredible destructive power. However, they had long since fallen into disrepair.

The castle was surrounded by a lush garden, which resembled a swaying sea of violet as the wind blew past, carrying over a flowery fragrance far into the distance. However, some regions were mysteriously wrecked and destroyed.

The flower garden was protected by a metal fence. There was a gate with a narrow winding path that led directly to the castle.

Nie Yan rode up to the gate and dismounted from his Faulkner Warhorse. He surveyed his surroundings but didn't sense the presence of any monsters. It seemed peaceful. He took a step toward the garden.

You have discovered Earl Kelfied's Castle

Nie Yan received an update to his quest.

Quest - Talk to Earl Kelfield

Earl Kelfield's Castle is brimming with danger. Ever since the undead started appearing in his garden, his servants no longer dared to stay and left, leaving him with no choice but to hire outside help. But if that wasn't strange enough. Recently, the Earl left his castle in the dead of night. The next morning he was found lying in his garden sound asleep covered in mud and dirt. Since that incident he's been adrift in delirium, constantly mumbling, "Ina, Ina, Ina..."

Phantom Princess Ina!? Nie Yan's mind trembled. What a strange coincidence!

It appeared this was a series of related quests!

I have to talk to Earl Kelfield to find some clues! Nie Yan calmly strode forward down the path toward the castle in the distance.

The walls surrounding the castle were crumbling apart, looking as if they had weathered many centuries. The wind blowing across the field of flowers brought along a gloomy cold mixed with the faint scent of decay.

Nie Yan furrowed his brows. This was a telltale sign that undead were nearby.

Skeletons would usually start spawning in the garden after the player accepted the Earl Kelfield's Worries quest.

Nie Yan arrived in front of the castle entrance, a pair of solid and thick metal gates rusted over due to age. Feeling a cold and dreary

breeze nip at the back of his neck, he slowly pushed open the gates and entered a dimly lit lounge. It appeared as if some inexplicable force was preventing the sunlight from coming in.

At this moment, two silhouettes stepped out from the shadows.

Nie Yan was startled and grabbed onto the hilt of Zennarde's Sword, ready to enter combat at any time. He made out the appearance of the two people in front of him. They wore leather armour and held wooden round shields in their left hands and shabby axes in their right. When they didn't attack him outright, he realized they were NPCs.

Nie Yan activated Transcendent Insight.

Militiaman Breckon: Level 45

Militiaman Bernard: Level 46

Breckon was tall and as sturdy as an ox. He appeared honest and simple, not giving off the slightest bit of killing intent. Bernard was somewhat shorter. He looked like your run-of-the-mill youth.

"S-s-sir Devil Slayer, Great Thief, Grand Scholar! N-nice to meet you!" Bernard stuttered nervously after seeing all of Nie Yan's titles.

"Greetings, Sir..." Breckon finally spoke up after what seemed like half-a-day. It appeared he wasn't the talkative type.

Nie Yan nodded in response. "Hello, I'm wondering if you two can bring me to Earl Kelfield. I believe I can help with his problem."

"Yes! Right away, sir. Please follow me!" Bernard said in a respectful tone.

These two militiamen brought Nie Yan deeper into the castle.

"Earl Kelfield is a good man. He's already lived in this castle for more than 60 years. After those evil creatures appeared, many people urged him to leave. But he refused to go. All of his servants

left his side. Only the two of us stuck around until now,” Bernard narrated. He then turned to Nie Yan with a sad look in his eyes. “Sir Devil Slayer, please help the Earl!”

“Of course. God will protect all those who are good and righteous,” Nie Yan assured. He started sifting through the information Bernard provided in his head. It appeared there was a reason for Earl Kelfield refusing to leave the castle, probably related to Phantom Princess Ina. He could ask the Earl in person to find out.

Following the two militiamen, Nie Yan passed through many hallways and winding corridors before arriving in a large room, where he saw a long table with a candelabra in the center and a luxurious red carpet running along the floor.

Nie Yan looked up ahead at the old square windows hidden behind crimson red curtains. A ray of sunlight barely shone through between the gaps. An elderly man sat next to the window sill reclined on a chair behind an old wooden desk, rocking back and forth as he gazed outside with a bleak and forlorn expression on his face.

This was Earl Kelfield!

Nie Yan shifted his attention from the elderly Earl Kelfield to a large, worn-out painting hanging on the wall. It was a striking portrait of Phantom Princess Ina, the same one he had stolen Abak’s Gloves of Sealing from in the Colin Gobi!

Earl Kelfield turned toward Nie Yan. Draped in an ash-gray fur coat, he looked old and withered. His hand resembled tree bark, lacking the slightest hint of vitality.

Nie Yan could see the deep sadness contained within the Earl’s eyes.

“You came.” Earl Kerfield’s dry lips cracked into a warm, child-like smile, as though he was about to be unburdened from his

worries.

Seeing Earl Kelfield's appearance, Nie Yan was taken by surprise. The Earl hadn't greeted him with any of his titles. Given the strict way in which Conviction handled title addresses, this was definitely odd.

"It's nice to meet you, Earl Kelfield," Nie Yan greeted respectfully, then walked up to the Earl's desk.

Bernard and Breckon respectfully withdrew from the room.

Earl Kelfield turned back to window. His gaze was distant, as if he were looking somewhere far away.

Nie Yan looked at the painting. Judging from the dust gathered on its surface, he speculated it must be at least half-a-century old. "Is that your wife? She looks beautiful." He had to find some way to gather information on this quest, and this painting hanging on the wall was a readily-available clue!

"Yes..." Earl Kelfield gazed at the painting on the wall before letting out a deep sigh. "Youngster, are you willing to listen to my story?"

"Of course." Nie Yan nodded. Everything played out as expected. He had guided Earl Kelfield into progressing with the quest.

"I was quite wealthy back in the day. The castle and nearby fields all belonged to me, and every villager worked for me. This castle was built during the Era of Shared Governance. It was bought by my grandfather and passed down to me. I was always told this castle was cursed, but I never believed their ill words. That was, until the year when bandits raided the castle, killing my parents and snatching away much of our wealth. I started becoming suspicious." The Earl shook his head. "Ina, my wife, she was an orphan who grew up in the Grendol Orphanage. She was good friends with another girl called Patience. I happened to hire the two of them as my maids. Her sweet and pure smile was like that of

an angel and could make all your worries disappear in a flash. It was love at first sight. I fell for her, deeply infatuated with that enchanting smile. It was God's blessing to the world. If only I was allowed to see it again, I could die peacefully," Earl Kelfield narrated as he lost himself in his memories.

Nie Yan quietly listened without interrupting. He could feel Earl Kelfield's deep love.

"Ina and I eventually got married. I wanted to make her the happiest woman in the world. Her love allowed me to get past the grief of losing my father and mother. Our first child was born three years later. It was a girl, and I named her Nia. She was just as beautiful as her mother. I believed those happy days would last forever, until the Marcos Mountain eroded into flat plains, until this very castle collapsed into ruin, becoming as ancient as the history of the continent. Alas, it was not meant to be, and everything changed. The passion slowly dimmed into embers, and I could feel a demon growing in my heart. Patience, that seductress, was just like a siren from the folktales, bewitching my mind. I squandered our money lavishly until our savings ran dry. Finally, one day, Ina discovered our scandalous affair. Her weeping and grief-stricken appearance deeply stabbed at my heart. It were as if my very soul was being ripped apart! I snapped out of my spell. Only then did I realize just how much of a wretch and scoundrel I was. But by then, it was already too late. What had I done...?" Earl Kelfield closed his eyes as tears started flowing out.

Chapter 388 - Holy Stone

Nie Yan felt his emotions stir. Even though he had experienced a myriad of things in his past life, it was impossible to remain indifferent in this moment. A sympathetic expression surfaced on his face as he continued to listen in silence.

“I left the castle to drown my remorse in drink. I wanted to say, ‘Ina, I was wrong... Please, forgive me. I’m willing to repent with this worthless life of mine!’ But by the time I came home, I saw her motionless body hanging under a beam, as though she were fast asleep. I vividly remember the look on her pale and lifeless face, the tear stains that had yet to dry... She took her own life as a way of silently denouncing me! Why? Ina! Why couldn’t you just wait for me to come back home! We still have Nia! We still have our family! But no matter how much I shouted, Ina didn’t wake up, carrying her grief along with her as she left this world. Oh, God! How do I redeem myself!? At that moment, I felt a gentle tug on my sleeve. It was Nia. She asked, ‘Daddy, is mommy asleep...?’” Earl Kelfield’s face was full of anguish as he broke down and sobbed with bitter tears.

Nie Yan’s heart ached as he stared at the Earl’s mournful and deceptit figure. If he had known earlier, he wouldn’t have asked this old man to relive such painful memories.

“It wasn’t much later, days maybe, when Patience came to me with a blood-soaked dagger. That mad woman! What did she do? I rushed out of the room, and to my horror I found Nia lying on the floor, the life rapidly draining from her body. I felt a light touch on my shoulder as Patience whispered into my ear, ‘From now on, no one will get between us ever again! We can finally be together! You can bear my child, start a new family!’ That woman, she had already lost her mind. She had committed such a cruel and savage act! In my rage, I turned the dagger on her. That vile woman!” The Earl trembled in anger before weakly slumping back into his chair.

“I did everything I could. But in the end, Nia left me as well. She was a pitiful and guiltless child! It was only many years later that I realized there was no righting any wrongs the moment I crossed that line. I destroyed everything I loved and cared for with my own hands. This is my sin to bear. Ever since then, I’ve been all alone in this world, destined to live on with this pain and guilt.”

Earl Kelfield’s words resonated deeply with Nie Yan. Every person had their own demons. You would stray further and further away once you crossed a certain line, making one mistake after another before ultimately living a life full of regret.

“Why didn’t you abandon the castle? Leave this place behind and start your life anew?” Nie Yan asked. He had just unearthed a clue.

“Both Ina and Nia are buried in the garden. I want to guard their graves,” Earl Kelfield replied. “Beyond that, a cloaked stranger visited my residence one night. I was handed an item, then told if I handed it over to a certain person, my sins would be forgiven and the curse placed on this castle would be lifted. I tried to ask who but received no reply. I’ve waited for over 30 years, though it’s felt more like a thousand, for this person to show up. Then, today you arrived.” The Earl fished around in his pocket with his wrinkled hand before taking out a curious-looking stone. It was pure white, shaped like a tooth, and roughly the size of a thumb. “This is the item I was entrusted with. Take it. I’m sure it will help you find what you’re looking for.”

Nie Yan reached out his hand and accepted the stone. It was translucent like jade and emitted a soft, gentle radiance that soothed the heart.

Nie Yan examined the stone.

Holy Stone (Quest Item)

Requirements: 60 Willpower

Description: Brave Adventurer! You who pursues buried history

set foot on your journey to seek out the Tyrant Abak Set and show the world the glory of the Empire once more! Properties: Illuminate everything in a 30 meter radius.

Holy Illumination: Disperse the surrounding darkness and banish all evil creatures nearby. Duration: 30 seconds. Cooldown: 2 Days.

Search: Reveal the position of any nearby item belonging to the Tyrant Abak Set. Range: 5,000 meters. Cooldown: 2 hours.

Restrictions: Owner of the Glimpse of Darkness

“Earl Kelfield, thank you for sharing your story with me,” Nie Yan said. It was time for him to move on with his quest.

The Glimpse of Darkness was a prerequisite for triggering this quest. The Holy Stone would lead him to more clues!

Earl Kelfield broke into a relieved smile. “With the item delivered, my mission is complete. I have no more attachments to this world. Adventurer, may you journey forth with courage and conviction.”

Nie Yan could feel Earl Kelfield’s life gradually leaving his body after he handed over the Holy Stone. His condition rapidly deteriorated.

Breckon and Bernard started shedding tears as grief filled their faces. They knew the Earl was not long for this world.

The light in the Earl’s eyes dimmed. “I can hear my family calling to me. Friends, do not grieve my passing for my sins are absolved. I can finally be at peace. I will exit like a gentle breeze. May the light shine upon the world, and you all live without regrets.”

Earl Kelfield’s body melted into motes of light as his spirit floated and flew out the window.

Following the disappearance of the Earl, all that remained in his chair was a dusty old book.

Nie Yan picked it up and flipped through the pages. It was a prayer book. Over the last several decades, Earl Kelfield had constantly recited the litanies inside to atone for his sins.

This book was written in the Ancient Common Language. Written on the cover in a large bold font was Holy Prayers.

It was just an ordinary book. Suddenly, a small necklace with a sapphire pendant fell out between the pages. It looked quite beautiful. Some words were engraved on the back of the pendant.

「 May the repentant receive the salvation of the Light.

May everyone obtain happiness.」

Nie Yan examined the necklace.

Necklace of Holy Radiance (Dark Gold)

Requirements: 30 Focus

Properties: Health +500, Holy Magic Skill Level +1

Restrictions: Holy Mage

Seeing the Holy Magic Skill Level +1, Nie Yan's mind trembled. This Necklace of Holy Radiance was definitely more valuable than ordinary Sub Legendary-grade equipment. Many properties in equipment were randomized. The chance of the All Skill Level +1 property appearing was next to zero.

Since the necklace was a Holy Mage item, Nie Yan planned to give it to Xie Yao.

Xie Yao's gear was practically unrivalled in Asskickers United. With unsurpassed strength and beauty, she became one of the goddesses in the guild. The most beautiful girls in the guild were Xie Yao, One Strike Vow, Painted Muslin, Moon Child, and Blue Feather. Each had their own merits, and it was hard to decide who took the crown.

Thinking about Xie Yao, Nie Yan felt his heart stir.

Nie Yan tossed the Necklace of Holy Radiance into his bag. It was about time for him to get going. He wondered where this quest would lead him next.

Suddenly, Nie Yan felt the Holy Stone in his bag vibrate. He quickly took it out and activated Search as a marker appeared in the middle of his map. A piece of the Tyrant Abak Set was nearby!

“Bernard, Breckon, can you show me around the castle?” Nie Yan asked. He wasn’t familiar with the layout, so having them lead him around would definitely save him a lot of work.

“It’d be our honour, Sir Devil Slayer.” Bernard replied. “Follow me.”

Breckon and Bernard started showing him around. Nie Yan could feel the reaction of the Holy Stone growing stronger the deeper they went inside the castle. When they arrived at an intersection, he looked down the hallway and saw a long corridor with many rooms on both sides. The walls and doors looked poorly maintained, and the floor was covered in a layer of dust. It was evident this place hadn’t been visited by people in a long time. Even stranger was the fact that the area was sealed off by a metal fence.

Just as Bernard was about to bring him elsewhere, Nie Yan stopped and asked, “Why can’t we go there?”

“It’s the cursed corridor. Two servants died horrible deaths there. That’s why the Earl sealed it off. No one has dared to enter that forbidden area since,” Bernard explained.

Nie Yan examined the fence. It was made out of ordinary metal, and without magic protection. He lightly struck it with Zennarde’s Sword. With a loud klang, the bars shattered and fell to the ground.

Breckon and Bernard were frightened by Nie Yan’s actions. This sword’s might was too fierce!

“Like this, we can go in.” Nie Yan sheathed Zennarde’s Sword and stepped into the corridor. But Breckon and Bernard didn’t follow. He turned to them and asked, “What’s wrong, guys? Come on!”

“Earl Kelfield forbade us from entering that area. Even now after he’s passed away, we still can’t go against his word,” Bernard replied in an awkward tone.

“I see, you guys stay here then,” Nie Yan said. He understood the quest wouldn’t allow Breckon and Bernard to guide him any further.

Nie Yan’s quest senses were extremely sharp. He could instantly determine the requirements and contents of a quest from an NPC’s words.

The floorboards groaned as Nie Yan stepped over them. The more he walked, the longer this corridor seemed, almost as though it had no end.

Nie Yan kicked up clouds of dust as he walked past, slowing down when he noticed bloodstains on the floor. They had already turned black. He didn’t know how many decades they had been there.

From these bloodstains, Nie Yan judged the victim had been ambushed from behind, bitten and dragged away.

A dense miasma lingered in the air. Nie Yan could determine there was most definitely a powerful monster lurking in the shadows.

Chapter 389 - Abak's Bloody Dagger

Nie Yan cautiously trod forward, prepared to face any unknown danger, while the reaction of the Holy Stone in his hand grew all the more intense.

He discovered a bloodstain in front of a half-closed door. He took a deep breath, then stepped forward, ready to activate Gale Step at a moment's notice.「Bang!」He forced the door open with a kick and entered inside. But contrary to his expectations, he wasn't ambushed.

Nie Yan was greeted by a simple and crude room, roughly 5 by 5 meters in size. The floor was covered in a layer of dust. There was a small bed against the wall with several neatly folded blankets stacked on top, a few cabinets that had long fallen into disrepair, and a couple of old pots sitting in the corner. He also saw some books lying on top of a desk, but they were just miscellaneous items.

Nie Yan breathed a sigh of relief. As he searched around, something on the desk caught his eye. He walked forward and discovered some pages of a diary. He picked them up and gave them a quick lookover. Blood had seeped into them and smudged much of the writing.

He organized the pages and started reading.

“Like a pale winter sun, his charm bewitched me and drove me mad. Ina, please forgive me. I believed I could take care of the both of you. But those filthy thoughts gradually invaded my mind, and those delusional well-meaning wishes of the past had long since been buried under a pile of rot. When he held me, how could I resist? I was rapt with ecstasy. I wanted to melt in his embrace. When you decided to leave us, I was filled with a warped sense of happiness. I thought I could replace you, but I was wrong...(Too badly damaged to continue)”

This was Patience's diary. Nie Yan knitted his brows. He recalled Patience was stabbed to death by Earl Kelfield.

Suddenly, several lines surfaced where there was previously blank space.

"I'm willing to become an undying spirit, not to avenge my death at your hands, but to stay by your side and watch over you in this ancient castle, 'till the very end..."

Nie Yan's mind trembled. He nervously glanced around but detected no other presence in the room.

A cold breeze swept through the room and carried the diary pages away as they vanished without a trace.

Nie Yan sank into deep thought. The monster that killed the two servants must have been Patience. He continued searching around the room but didn't find anything else of interest.

He wondered where the piece of the Tyrant Abak Set was located.

Nie Yan left the room and returned to exploring the corridor. He encountered several skeletons on the floor.

Shadows slowly crept toward Nie Yan unnoticed. As soon as they touched his feet, they shot forth and wrapped around him.

By the time Nie Yan noticed and wanted to run, it was already too late. The shadows resembled incorporeal hands, holding him in place.

What's going on!?

Nie Yan was ready to activate Gale Step at any time, but he patiently waited.

At this moment, a shadowy figure appeared before him. It had a sinister and frightening appearance, radiating evil energy. It was a Wraith!

Ghosts were divided into two categories, Phantoms and Wraiths. The former were passive unless provoked while the latter would

attack any living creature in the vicinity.

Nie Yan activated Transcendent Insight.

Patience, Wraith of the Ancient Castle (Lord): Level 50

Health: 120,000/120,000

It was a Level 50 Lord!

Patience charged toward Nie Yan and swiped at him with her claws.

Nie Yan activated Gale Step, blocking the attack and freeing himself of his bindings. He circled behind Patience and attacked her with Backstab followed by Eviscerate.

Wraiths couldn't be afflicted with bleed or poison. Even so, Nie Yan still dealt 1,600 damage to Patience. It was a pity this was barely a scratch to a Level 50 Lord. The only positive was that her health regenerated fairly slowly.

Patience was enraged after her ambush failed. Her attacks became even fiercer as she charged forward.

Nie Yan attempted to evade with a side step. However, Patience's claw elongated and slashed him across the chest.

-1,283!

Shit! What kind of damage is this? Nie Yan inwardly cried out in alarm. At this rate, he wouldn't last more than three hits!

Patience let out an ear-piercing screech and charged forward once more. Nie Yan quickly pulled back. At this moment, he didn't have many evasive skills at his disposal, only two Freedom Skills and Shadow Waltz. Disappear might work too. However, he still hadn't mastered the two Freedom Skills, particularly Reverse Grip Backstab; he had yet to successfully pull it off.

It appeared normal evasive maneuvers were ineffective against this Level 50 Lord-class Wraith!

When death seemed inevitable, Nie Yan suddenly thought of something and took out the Holy Stone and Necklace of Holy Radiance from his bag. The two items in his hands released a brilliant light that dispersed the surrounding darkness.

This was the holy power of the Holy Stone and Necklace of Holy Radiance.

Patience let out a miserable screech as she tried blocking the light with her hands. However, her body started burning and releasing smoke.

Nie Yan was ecstatic. The Holy Stone and Necklace of Holy Radiance were actually effective against Patience!

Items obtained during a quest often had a relevant use.

Patience endured the burning light and charged at Nie Yan, her speed noticeably slower than before.

Mangle!

Just as Patience slashed down with her claws, Nie Yan's figure blurred as he activated Phantom Assassination.

His movements were sharper and faster than before. His body flashed past as the blade of Zennarde's Sword drew a clean arc across Patience's throat.

-6,082

Phantom Assassination: 59% Completion, 83% damage, 0 Combo.

Nie Yan could only deal such high damage thanks to the weakening effect the Holy Stone and Necklace of Holy Radiance had on Patience!

Seeing Patience rushing towards him again, Nie Yan turned tail and fled. He couldn't fight her head on, so his only option was to kite her. He also needed to drag out the battle as long as possible, lest he wanted to be left in the awkward situation where none of his life-saving skills were off cooldown.

Nie Yan used Shadow Waltz to close the distance and slash Patience.

-6,792

He didn't stop and kept running while Patience gave chase, continuing their game of cat and mouse.

Nie Yan was extremely fast. As he reached the end of the long corridor, he bolted up a flight of stairs and entered a large hall. Suddenly, the Holy Stone in his hand started vibrating intensely. He looked up and saw a dagger mounted to the wall on the other side of the room. The oddly curved blade had a sleek design and emitted a stifling murderous aura.

Abak's Bloody Dagger, it was here!

Chapter 390 - Defeating the Wraith of the Ancient Castle

This room in the basement was oddly shaped like an oval. A table sat in the center littered with all kinds of gold oddities and bobbles. Tucked away in a corner were many earthen pots and jars, having collected a couple decades' worth of cobwebs and dust. Some of them were broken with black powder leaking out.

Nie Yan detected the unmistakable scent of gunpowder as he breathed in through his nose.

Nie Yan recalled an incident in his past life where a medium-sized guild called Moon Wolf had discovered valuable treasures and crafting materials in this ancient castle. But before they could dispatch people to transport the goods away, Victorious Return ambushed them and snatched everything away for themselves.

It seemed there was some basis to that rumour.

On top of an adjacent table were piles of mysterious scrolls. However, Nie Yan couldn't be bothered to spare them a glance. His attention was wholly focused on Abak's Bloody Dagger. It was rumoured that due to the countless lives Tyrant Abak reaped with this dagger, a powerful curse was placed on it which prevented ordinary people from approaching.

The dagger was mounted to the wall. A bloody aura slowly leaked out of it, emanating an ominous presence.

The Tyrant Abak Set was Nie Yan's ultimate goal. With this set, he would need nothing else. He would have to keep progressing through the questline, finding one clue after another, completing the set one piece at a time. This endeavor would probably take at least three years to complete.

Since he had discovered Abak's Bloody Dagger, he absolutely had to have it!

At this moment, Patience floated down the stairs and charged after him.

“You wretched human and your holy light!” Patience’s appearance was frightening as she stabbed at him with her claw-like hands.

Nie Yan knitted his brows. It appeared Patience had some rudimentary intelligence. These kinds of monsters were the toughest to deal with. They didn’t fight blindly. If they couldn’t beat you, they’d call for back-up. If they saw your health drop low, they’d pursue you relentlessly to the end of the world. And if you dropped their health below a certain threshold, they’d try to flee.

Nie Yan glanced at Patience. She still had over 110,000 health.

Defeating her would be no easy task.

Since Nie Yan couldn’t beat her by himself, there was only one option left. Call for help!

Nie Yan took out a pouch of Flash Powder from his bag and chucked it at Patience.「Poof!」A dazzling radiance engulfed the surroundings.

Patience let out a miserable shriek. She was blinded by the intense brilliance.

Nie Yan quickly ducked into a corner. He activated Deterrence, then opened up the skill window for Divine Recruitment. After a quick glance at the list, he made up his mind and summoned the Rank 7 Paladin Keo who had 200% of his stats and an hourly fee of 1,000 gold.

For the sake of obtaining Abak’s Bloody Dagger, Nie Yan went for broke.

Keo materialized beside Nie Yan, wielding a sword and shield.

“Sir Devil Slayer, it is an honour to serve you. May the holy light forever be with you.” Keo stared at Patience up ahead and shouted

in a righteous tone, “For the sake of spreading the faith of Light, by God’s will, I will exterminate all evil creatures! This is the duty of a Paladin!”

All Paladins summoned by Divine Recruitment were pious followers of the Light. They also had a rudimentary level of intelligence.

When Patience regained her vision, she resumed her pursuit of Nie Yan but halted in her tracks after reaching within six meters of him. This was the effect of his improved Deterrence! The emergence of Paladin Keo also filled her with a sense of dread.

Keo should be able hold his own against Patience, for a short while at least. Nie Yan immediately began chanting as one syllable after another flowed out of his mouth. He was preparing to summon Lil’ Gold as the space around him started to warp and fluctuate.

With the addition of Lil’ Gold, the three of them combined could definitely take down Patience.

At this moment, Patience let out a piercing shriek which spread out as a destructive sound wave and struck Nie Yan.

-32 A damage value floated up above Nie Yan’s head. He was interrupted mid-cast.

Nie Yan clicked his tongue. He didn’t expect Patience to have a ranged control skill that could interrupt his cast.

Bosses with intelligence were truly tricky.

Nie Yan failed summoning Lil’ Gold! Even so, it was still possible to defeat Patience with just the help of Keo. He checked the most important skill in Keo’s skill window, Heal! It had a cooldown of roughly 20 seconds and could restore over 2,000 health.

Good! It’s enough! Nie Yan dashed toward Patience.

Patience floated forward and greeted him with her sharp claws.

Nie Yan activated Gale Step, blocking the attack, then circled behind Patience and slashed her in the back with Zennarde's Sword.

Patience turned around and retaliated by slashing him across the chest.

-1,357

Nie Yan was bathed in a gentle radiance as Paladin Keo healed him for over 2,000 health!

In the next moment, Keo charged forward and struck Patience with Divine Strike as a holy radiance burst forth from his blade.

-15,928! Patience screamed in pain as a frightening damage value floated up above her head.

Holy light was effective against the undead!

This was why Paladins loved to grind on undead mobs.

Even Nie Yan was frightened by Keo's high damage. He inwardly rejoiced. Like this, dealing with Patience would be a piece of cake!

Keo let out a roar and bathed Patience in the cleansing light of Purify. Her face warped in pain as she started releasing smoke. However, a bloody aura was slowly building up around her.

Nie Yan was wary, but he threw caution to the wind. He furiously stabbed and slashed at Patience with reckless abandon. Keo was much the same.

-6,738

-1,2957

-7,023....

In a short while, Patience's health fell below 10%.

She was only one or two attacks away from being defeated!

Just at this moment, Patience let out a blood-curdling screech.

Howl of Terror!

Nie Yan had no time to react at all. Fear permeated into every cell of his being, his mind blanked as he started unwillingly fleeing.

Paladin Keo reacted in the same manner,.

Patience charged after Keo. She was completely aggroed on to him, given that he was dealing the most damage and the undead had an innate loathing of anything holy.

She relentlessly attacked Keo, slashing away with her sharp claws, shaving away his more than 5,000 health in the blink of an eye.

Keo collapsed dead on the ground.

Patience shifted her attention to Nie Yan.

Fortunately, Mind Magic generally didn't last long. The first six seconds of Howl of Terror was hard crowd control. But after that, he was free to use his skills again, even if he still didn't have control of his body.

Mind Immune!

After six seconds passed, Nie Yan immediately freed himself from the effects of Howl of Terror. Seeing Patience pounce at him with her sharp claws, he activated Shadow Waltz to block the attack and circled behind her.

Patience only had 6,783 health left. Nie Yan's muscles swelled as Zennarde's Sword sped toward her neck.

Cut Throat!

At this moment, Patience activated Three-Hit Flurry!

Her claws slashed across Nie Yan's chest.

-1,356

-1,287

Just as the third hit was about to land, Nie Yan's blade streaked

Patience's neck.

-6,788! Patience let out a dying wail.

Nie Yan, wary that Patience might try to pull something funny, immediately drank an Intermediate Health Potion and prepared an Advanced Combat Bandage.

Patience exploded into a pile of ashes, from which a white ball of light floated out and flew away.

Her evil spirit was exorcised.

It's finally over... Nie Yan breathed a sigh of relief.

Patience dropped two pieces of Dark Gold-grade equipment. One was for a Shadow Priest and the other for an Arcane Mage. Nie Yan stored them in his bag, then approached Abak's Bloody Dagger. The Holy Stone in his hand vibrated intensely and released a brilliant light. With a hard tug, he dislodged the dagger from the wall.

Nie Yan could feel a powerful corrosive energy surrounding Abak's Bloody Dagger. If it weren't from the purifying light of the Holy Stone, he would've long since died.

This dagger could only be obtained through the quest from the Glimpse of Darkness!

Nie Yan turned his attention to the pile of sheepskin scrolls piled on one of the tables. He didn't know how long they had been sitting there, but they had already turned grey.

They appeared to be recipes!

Just as Nie Yan was about to walk over to check them out, he felt a slight nip at the back of his neck. It was extremely faint, almost indiscernible, but it was still picked up by his sharp senses.

It's a Thief! Nie Yan's mind trembled.

Given how high his Awareness was, it was surprising that he couldn't sense the opponent's location.

Nie Yan surveyed his surroundings, but it was completely empty. He couldn't find a single trace of the enemy Thief!

Since this was a Level 50 map, his opponent had to at least be Level 50. Furthermore, their Cloaking had to be extremely high as well! How else could they go unnoticed by him in this relatively cramped space?

Nie Yan judged that the opposing Thief must have just arrived; otherwise, they would've already attacked him while he was dealing with Patience.

Nie Yan's eyes narrowed, flashing with killing intent. He walked over to the table and reached out his hand to pick up the sheepskin scrolls.

Are these what you came here for? Let's see what you do when I try to take them...

At this moment, the unmistakable glint of a dagger emerged behind Nie Yan.

You've finally shown yourself!

Chapter 391 - Elven Thief

「Klang!」Nie Yan swung around and parried just as the enemy's blow was about to land on the back of his head, sparks flying as the two daggers clashed.

Concussive Blow!

The other Thief reacted pretty quickly. He switched grips on his dagger and stabbed toward Nie Yan's forehead.

Phantom Assassination!

Nie Yan's figure blurred as he evaded the attack and stabbed toward the enemy's throat.

Seeing dodging was impossible, the Thief activated Gale Step to neutralize Nie Yan's attack.

Since activating Gale Step reduced the effectiveness of stealth by 60%, Nie Yan could finally sense the location of the enemy Thief.

Eye of Truth!

Nie Yan's pupils turned blood red as the veins around his eyes bulged out. He quickly discovered a silhouette rapidly pulling back, putting six meters between them.

Decent skill, fast reactions, tsk... He's a tricky one.

Nie Yan immediately noticed the opponent's long ears, which he almost mistook for horns, and slim build. It was an elf!

It was rumoured the length of an elf's ears was closely related to the amount of magic power their bodies contained. The longer the ears, the stronger the elf. This was something implemented by the system. But the difference wasn't usually visible to the naked eye.

It's an Elven Thief! Nie Yan never expected to encounter one here!

Nie Yan's lips curved into a faint smile. Guo Huai had reported

they had lost track of the Elven Thief from Angel Corps. Wasn't this clearly him?

Nie Yan wondered if he was followed or this just happened to be a coincidence. He inspected the Elven Thief with Transcendent Insight.

Bodhi Skybright (Elf): Level 52

Class: Great Thief

Nie Yan's mind trembled. It was him! He didn't know many experts from the Satreen Empire, nor did he watch videos of their battles in the previous timeline. After all, their respective skills and racial talents were different, so there was no meaning to it. But there were a couple of foreign players whose fame reached even the Viridian Empire. Whether they came for leisure or questing, their shocking feats had left deep and lasting impressions. Bodhi Skybright was one such figure.

After becoming a Shadow Dancer, this fellow had teleported to Calore and took out six other Shadow Dancers in a row before finally being defeated by Sun. It was an extremely close match, with several dozen exchanges. Bodhi Skybright had nearly won, but Sun had made a huge comeback and dealt a finishing blow. Even though Bodhi Skybright had lost, he was never forgotten. In the Viridian Empire, the only other player that could rival Sun was Shadow Killer, and perhaps King of the World if he hadn't already disappeared from Conviction. Some people believed there were no more than five Shadow Dancers in the Viridian Empire that could go toe-to-toe with Bodhi Skybright.

Bodhi Skybright's combat style focused on agility and speed. As soon as his attack failed, he would retreat, never tangling with the opponent for too long.

Nie Yan didn't know how the current Bodhi Skybright compared to his previous timeline incarnation. But given that he already advanced to a Great Thief, he shouldn't be weak.

Many top rank players hopped from one popular virtual reality game to the next. Their comprehension abilities were high. As soon as they familiarized themselves with a game, they could display impressive combat ability.

Nie Yan didn't take action, buying himself some time. Bodhi Skybright had arrived late, so he wasn't aware Nie Yan had put several important skills on cooldown during the battle with Patience; otherwise, he would've already charged forward.

The longer the battle dragged out, the more advantageous it was for Nie Yan.

Bodhi Skybright, who was hidden in the shadows, felt a chill run down his spine when he saw Nie Yan's demon-like eyes staring right at him.

It was an eye skill! And it appeared Nie Yan's was a higher rank than most!

Bodhi Skybright had decided to tail Nie Yan after learning from Victorious Return that he was headed for this location. However, he had arrived a step too late. Nie Yan's battle with Patience had already concluded, so he failed to get one over on him.

He ranked fifth among all the Thieves in Angel Corps. As an Elven Thief, his racial talent was extremely suited for his class. Not to mention he had many skills that increased his Cloaking. However, his stealth was still seen through by Nie Yan.

Bodhi Skybright recalled Love Guru's warning. As the guild leader of Asskickers United, Nie Yan absolutely wasn't to be underestimated. It was best to ambush him while he was busy dealing with a monster. If the assassination attempt failed, he should immediately retreat.

However, Bodhi Skybright never expected to be noticed as soon as he arrived. Nie Yan's Awareness had to be at least twice as high as his own Cloaking to discover him so easily! His stealthing ability

which far surpassed his peers was something that he had always been proud of. But it meant nothing in front of Nie Yan!

Bodhi Skybright couldn't possibly understand how overpowered Nie Yan was. If this information was revealed, he would probably ram his head into a wall. If he knew how high Nie Yan's stats were or how many powerful skills he possessed, he would've already tucked his tail between his legs and fled.

It was just that Bodhi Skybright didn't wish to leave quite yet. The amount of Black Gunpowder in this room caught his attention. He wanted to transport it all away. But since the jars were too big, he couldn't store them in his bag.

If the Black Gunpowder couldn't be transported away, so be it. However, he could tell from a glance that those sheepskin scrolls on the table were valuable.

They were definitely treasures!

This was why he couldn't hold back any longer and took action when Nie Yan was about to reach out and grab those scrolls.

His first ambush attempt had failed, and his stealth had been seen through by Nie Yan. However, he didn't feel good just giving up on these items and fleeing.

Bodhi Skybright made up his mind. He calmed himself, then glanced at Zennarde's Sword in Nie Yan's hands. His opponent's gear quality was extremely high, probably to an unimaginable extent. But at the end of the day, a Thief's worth was in their speed and reaction time. He still had a chance, but only if he used a Great Thief skill!

The battle was in a deadlock. Nie Yan's composed appearance caused Bodhi Skybright to feel anxious.

Thanks to the countless harrowing experiences both in real life and the game, Nie Yan had learned how to stay composed even in the tensest of situations. He glanced at his skill bar. Shadow Waltz

and Gale Step were both off cooldown. With these two skills, he felt assured. In all of Conviction, there was no Thief that could kill him. His familiarity with Gale Step was already marrow-deep. As soon as he encountered danger, he could immediately evade. Shadow Waltz was similar to Gale Step, so with these two skills, he had nothing to fear.

Nie Yan turned around and reached out his hand to grab those sheepskin scrolls on the table. He was determined to snatch them for himself!

Chapter 392 - Goblin Magic Cannons

Seeing Nie Yan reach for the scrolls, Bodhi Skybright immediately shot forth like a bullet.

Lock Down!

Lock Down, similar to Intimidate, paralyzed a target in place. Nie Yan felt a powerful force binding him, preventing him from moving.

Skewer!

Bodhi Skybright's blade drew a graceful arc through the air as he aimed for Nie Yan's back.

Skewer was a Great Thief skill that increased movement speed by 300%, pierced armour, and dealt high burst damage!

Die! Bodhi Skybright was brimming with confidence. His dagger was only inches away from piercing Nie Yan's heart. It was impossible for an ordinary person to dodge at this range!

This guy's got some pretty decent skills... Nie Yan activated Gale Step, taking advantage of the invincibility to neutralize Bodhi Skybright's attack as he reached out to grab the scrolls on the table.

Dammit! Bodhi Skybright was surprised. Seeing Nie Yan about to grab the scrolls, he took out a Web Scroll from his bag and crushed it in his hand.

A giant web fell from the sky and trapped Nie Yan within.

Hah! They're mine now! Bodhi Skybright broke out into a victorious smile as he reached out his hand to grab the scrolls.

At this moment, Nie Yan fired out a web line from his Silk Spinner Ring. It accurately hit the scrolls as he pulled them into his grasp.

Nie Yan smirked. Trying to compete with me? Dream on, kid!

Bodhi Skybright's eyes widened in shock. He never expected Nie Yan to suddenly turn the tables on him, and with spider webs no less!

Nie Yan swung Zennarde's Sword and destroyed the giant web trapping him. Activating Intimidate, he paralyzed Bodhi Skybright in place.

Nie Yan dashed toward the immobilized Bodhi Skybright and slashed down with Zennarde's Sword.

Just as it seemed like Bodhi Skybright was about to die a miserable death, he suddenly crushed a scroll in his hand.

Nie Yan slashed through Bodhi Skybright as his body turned illusory and disappeared.

Bodhi Skybright had used an Unknown Transfer Scroll!

It appeared Bodhi Skybright had come well prepared, planning to teleport away the moment danger struck.

Nie Yan sheathed Zennarde's Sword. It appeared Angel Corps was also starting to target him. In the Viridian Empire, Asskickers United was the only guild that could oppose Divine Protectors and Alliance of Mages. Angel Corps, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors were all backed by the Century Financial Group, so they were naturally on the same side. These three guilds were all fearsome opponents. As for Bloodlust Blades, their collapse was inevitable, so there was no need to worry about them any longer.

Bodhi Skybright reappeared in an open field about 1,000 meters away from the castle. He breathed out a sigh of relief. If he had been a second slower, he would've been a dead man. Sure enough, Mad Rogue Nirvana Flame was a tough nut to crack. What filled him with the most regret was that he had almost obtained those scrolls!

With the danger gone, Nie Yan finally had time to examine Abak's Bloody Dagger.

Abak's Bloody Dagger (Legendary): Unequippable

Requirements: 1,500 Strength, 1,200 Dexterity, Level 180

Description: This item can only be worn by the owner of the Glimpse of Darkness. It is only equippable when the owner has gathered the full set. Abak held strength in high regard. Only the powerful can become tyrants. Eliminate all traitors!

Properties: Attack +2,200, Life Steal +5%, Strength +700, Dexterity +320, All Stats +100, Ignore Level, Chaos Damage, Attacks inflict the following curses: Exhaust, Fate Lock, and Thorns

Set Completion: 2/8

This item is automatically bound to the owner of Volume I of the Book of Order, Glimpse of Darkness. It cannot be traded or dropped.

Exhaust lowered the target's defense; Fate Lock summoned a Fate Die that inflicted the target with a random debuff, the duration of which depended on the roll; and Thorns returned a portion of the damage the target dealt back to them.

Like this, Nie Yan had another piece of the Tyrant Abak Set.

Nie Yan checked his quest progress.

Find the Tyrant Abak Set: Travel to the Golden City. You may find some clues there.

Nie Yan could only enter the Golden City after reaching Level 60, so he had to put this quest aside for the time being.

Finally, Nie Yan took a look at the sheepskin scrolls he had just obtained.

Goblin Magic Cannon Blueprints (Rank 1)

Requirements: 5 Advanced Tinkerers, 1 Advanced Alchemist, 2 Advanced Runecrafters, and 1 Advanced Enchanter

They contained the blueprints for a Goblin Magic Cannon! The information was divided between many scrolls, with each one describing every component in great detail.

This was an extremely destructive cannon, with a 3-meter long barrel, rotating base, and hole at the side to pour in magic energy. It fired out 10 lbs cannon balls which would turn red hot due to heat generated from the detonation of gunpowder and magic energy.

The Goblin Magic Cannon had an astonishing range of 500 meters, which could be increased even further by firing from a tower or another elevated position. One could imagine the effects it would have when fired into a large crowd. If the ground was solid, the cannonball would even bounce and roll.

Looking at the crafting materials on the blueprints, the Goblin Magic Cannon required Black Gunpowder, various metals, enchanted runestones, and so on. There were over several hundred different items listed in total.

Crafting a Goblin Magic Cannon was an incredibly difficult task. It required a great deal of time and the combined effort of many different talents from various crafting professions. A cannon like this was more than enough to defend a city wall. If he could put a few on top of the Cripps Stronghold, it would become as unshakable as Mt. Tai, capable of repelling any invaders.

Nie Yan contacted Guo Huai and asked him to send people over to transport away the gunpowder.

「Just what could be so important to make you want to completely empty out a castle?」Guo Huai asked in surprise.

「Black Gunpowder!」Nie Yan replied. No matter how strong a player was, in the end they were no match for these powerful tools of war. With these cannons, Asskickers United would gain an additional card in their hands.

Thankfully, Nie Yan had managed to snatch the Goblin Magic Cannon Blueprints for himself during his exchange with Bodhi Skybright.

「Black Gunpowder...」Guo Huai no longer dared to dally. He immediately deployed over 2,000 players to Earl Kelfield's Ancient Castle.

「Contact Bird, and tell him we need 5 Advanced Tinkerers, 1 Advanced Alchemist, 2 Advanced Runecrafters, and 1 Advanced Enchanter.」Nie Yan shared the Goblin Magic Cannon Blueprints with Guo Huai.

「It seems like we'll be building cannon towers in the Cripps Stronghold.」Guo Huai's eyes lit up. Even though the blueprints were only for Rank 1 Goblin Magic Cannons, their destructive might was not to be looked down upon. Not to mention with a range of 500 meters, they would be indispensable during a siege.

「Our time is limited, so you should hurry. Make sure this matter doesn't leak out. We must keep it a secret,」Nie Yan instructed. The Goblin Magic Cannons would have an even greater effect when they were brought out with the enemy clueless to their existence.

The stronghold sieges of the previous timeline was the stage of these large-scale war machines and peak class players. Ordinary players were reduced to cannon fodder.

Before long, 2,000 players from Asskickers United arrived at Earl Kelfield's Ancient Castle. They guarded the perimeter while a group of players entered inside. Paladin of the Elegy and his group met up with Nie yan.

“We're here, Boss!” Paladin of the Elegy excitedly greeted.

“Good, take these jars of Black Gunpowder away. Make sure to clean out the entire castle. Don't leave a single speck behind!” Nie Yan ordered in a dignified tone.

“Yessir!” Paladin of the Elegy replied, his eyes sparkling with

reverence.

Nie Yan was normally friendly, but he would turn quite imposing during serious matters. Paladin of the Elegy immediately understood the importance of this task as he ordered his group to transport the gunpowder away.

Nie Yan stayed to supervise since he didn't feel at ease leaving such an important matter alone. The players from Asskickers United turned the whole castle upside down in their search. They found over 20 jars of Black Gunpowder and a large amount of materials required to craft the Goblin Magic Cannons. Fortune seemed to be on his side. It would've taken a great deal of time and resources for him to gather these things by himself, especially the Black Gunpowder. He would have to find a Black Gunpowder Recipe, and the amount produced every day would be limited. Thankfully, there was a large stockpile readily available here. By the time they burned through it, Asskickers United would have enough Advanced Tinkerers to produce a steady supply.

Such large movements from Asskickers United naturally didn't go unnoticed, especially by Victorious Return. Sadly, they were powerless. They could no longer compete with Asskickers United. It was already impressive they could hold onto their single stronghold. They soon learned from Bodhi Skybright that Asskickers United had discovered a large cache of Black Gunpowder. Unfortunately, they could only helplessly watch on as it was transported away.

2,000 players departed from Earl Kelfield's Ancient Castle and set out for the nearest Asskickers United stronghold in a grand and majestic fashion.

The jars of Black Gunpowder were too large to fit in player bags, so Asskickers United could only use the risky method of transporting them away physically. It would take roughly 30 minutes for them to reach the nearest stronghold, United City.

Chapter 393 - Ransack and Ransack

A tense atmosphere loomed over all of Asskickers United as Nie Yan and 2,000 players escorted the Black Gunpowder to United City. Such an important matter had to be handled with the utmost care. Mistakes wouldn't be tolerated! It was at this moment that Guo Huai put his intelligence network to good use. Every movement from every hostile guild no matter how small was reported back to him immediately.

Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine kept a close watch over Victorious Return. From time to time, their players would appear on the border of Victorious Return's sole stronghold to mock them, leading to skirmishes breaking out.

Heaven Breaker's hot temper prevented him from taking these insults lying down, so he stationed squads on the walls of the stronghold to attack all who dared to mock him.

Being watched so closely by Holy Empire and Sapphire Shrine, it was impossible for Victorious Return to take action against Asskickers United's transport group.

Guo Huai and the other higher-ups had already made ample preparations. If the group transporting the Black Gunpowder was attacked, troops would be immediately dispatched to rescue them. Of course, it was best if the procession reached United City without any disturbances.

Guo Huai believed there shouldn't be any issues. Nie Yan's group consisted of 2,000 players, after all.

...

At this moment, six Level 50 plus players donned in amazing Shaman equipment emerged on a hilltop, dashing between the trees. They were all class advanced Shamans!

Shamans were the most mysterious and difficult to deal with

class of the orc race.

Mages were the main force of the humans, Necromancers for the undead, and Shamans for the orcs.

Shamans were divided into Shaman Doctors and Elemental Shamans. The former specialized in healing while the latter specialized in controlling the elements. The Shamans on the hilltop had lightning symbols on their collars, signifying they were Elemental Shamans! Although their healing capabilities were weaker, they could deal devastating damage!

Besides Elemental and Healing Magic, Shamans would often dabble into other mysterious magics such as Totemic and Shadow Magic. Shamic Temples, similar to Magic Towers, contained unfathomable spells. Any Elemental Shaman that visited one would come out much stronger.

Up ahead were several dozen Level 50 Boas. One of the Elemental Shamans waved their staff and summoned a one-meter long totem covered with ashen flags. It floated in the air and discharged streaks of electricity into the surroundings.

Totemic Flags were NPC shop items that Shamans could buy to enhance the potency of their totems, greatly increasing the stats of all nearby allies.

The Shamans started chanting cryptic syllables. With a wave of their staffs, the streaks of lightning surrounding the totem shot out toward the group of Boas, bouncing from one Bao to the next.

Every streak of lightning bounced and bounced and bounced. Not a single Boa remained unscathed.

This was the Chain Lightning spell of Elemental Shamans. It was a different type of area-of-effect magic that could attack more than 10 targets with a single cast.

After these Boas were struck by the streaks of lightning, they collapsed to the ground, their corpses scorched and releasing

smoke.

“Love Guru and his group are in Calore. I wonder how they’re doing,” said a slim Shaman. He was called Nevernight, and ranked third among all Shamans in Angel Corps. The others in the group weren’t weak either, having all class advanced together.

Since there were only six players in their group, they easily avoided the sights of Asskickers United’s scouts, especially in such a large map.

“It’s good that Love Guru and them are attracting all the heat from Asskickers United. But you know what I don’t understand? We’re so far away from the Viridian Empire, why does Angel want to make enemies out of them?” Blood Wolf asked in a bewildered manner. He always paid attention to matters that related to the guild as a whole.

“The boss must have his own plans. Either way, the growth of Asskickers United is really astonishing. Bloodlust Blades is only a step away from destruction thanks to them,” Nevernight said. Underlings like them wouldn’t be privy to matters of this magnitude.

“This is going to be a joint operation with the top players of Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors. Everyone, stay alert. We have to succeed. Failure is not an option!” Blood Wolf reminded in a grave tone. This was related to the reputation of Angel Corps.

“Of course, we already know.”

“How much longer until the people from Asskickers United arrive?”

“I’d say roughly 10 or so minutes.”

“Alright! Get ready everyone, we’re going to start. Asskickers United might send some Thieves to scout ahead, so let’s find a good place to hide!”

The six Shamans found a relatively flat area in the dense thickets. Standing in a hexagon, they started chanting as line by line a magnificent hexagram formed on the ground. The magic energy in the air vibrated intensely as a gust of wind blew past.

A dark portal appeared at the center of the hexagram. When the magic energy in the area finally settled, players started walking out of the portal.

The first player to come out was the guild leader of Bloodlust Blades, Bloodlust Mad Blade. He wore a full set of Dark Gold grade, silver-black armour which glinted a dark lustre under the sunlight.

A total of 53 players stepped out of the portal, all of whom were class-advanced elites from Bloodlust Blades, Divine Protectors, and Alliance of Mages. Including the 6 Elemental Shamans from Angel Corps, there were altogether 59 Adept Class players.

Due to their uninterrupted growth, Divine Protectors and Alliances of Mages had far more Adept Class players than Asskickers United. This was only a portion of them. In comparison, Asskickers United only sported a dozen or so Adept Class players.

After a while, the dark portal trembled before disappearing into thin air. The six Shamans immediately sat down on the ground to recover their health and mana.

Mad Blade turned to the Elementalist beside him and asked with a solemn expression, “Did everyone make it?”

The Elementalist did a quick headcount. “Yeah, 12 from our guild, 25 from Alliances of Mages, and 16 from Divine Protectors.”

“Boss, I just received word that most of the top rank players in Asskickers United are doing their class advancement quests right now. There are only five or six players to watch out for in their group, including Nirvana Flame,” a nearby Priest reported.

“We owe you guys for helping us out in this operation,” Mad Blade said as he turned to the players from Alliances of Mages and

Divine Protectors.

“It’s nothing. We’re all on the same side after all.”

“Yea, Asskickers United has been acting far too arrogantly. It’s about time we teach them a lesson. Our guild leader told us to listen to your word as if it were their own. So if you need anything of us, don’t hesitate to speak up.”

The rest of the players from Alliances of Mages and Divine Protectors echoed these sentiments.

“Alright, I won’t treat you all as outsiders. A group of roughly 2,000 Asskickers United players transporting jars of Black Gunpowder will be arriving here any moment now. We’ll slaughter as many of them as we can, but our main priority is to snatch away the gunpowder for ourselves. They’ll definitely send support quickly, so we’ll probably only have 15 minutes at most. After that, no matter how well the battle might be going, we retreat immediately!” Mad Blade’s eyes scanned over the crowd of players in front of him. Whether it be in terms of skill or gear quality, they were the best in both aspects. Even without his commands, they would do fine.

“So what if they have the numbers advantage? We can easily sweep them away with area-of-effect magic. We’ve wiped out a 5,000-man force with just six players before,” an Elementalist arrogantly declared.

“Today, is only the start. There’s much more work to be done in the future! We’ll be launching an assault on their strongholds in a few days. After we tear them down, let’s see how much longer they can last in Calore!” Mad Blade ruthlessly announced. Bloodlust Blades was under a lot of pressure recently, especially after Asskickers United refused to rescind their bounty order. They were pushed into a corner with only one option left, and that was to make a decisive counterattack! As for worrying about Sapphire Shrine and Holy Empire interfering, he would just have Victorious

Return and Radiant Sacred Flame hold them off.

Under Mad Blade's command, the players split into three groups each heading in a different direction, lying in ambush among the trees.

...

Nie Yan's transport group arrived in an area with many hills. The terrain up ahead was complicated with a lot of dense thickets. It was the perfect place to set up an ambush.

They were relatively safe travelling in the plains. But in a wooded area, the danger level would rise significantly.

Nie Yan was worried about the jars of Black Gunpowder behind him. If they were hit by Fire Magic, the outcome would be disastrous. This was why he stationed most of the Warriors and Paladins around the gunpowder. He and several other skilled players also stood nearby, ready to deal with any potential danger.

"Paladins, make sure to protect the cargo with shielding magic! We absolutely can't lose it!" Nie Yan ordered. These jars of Black Gunpowder were extremely important to Asskickers United.

"Boss, should we dispatch some Thieves to scout up ahead?" Paladin of the Elegy asked.

"I want 200 Thieves to sweep the area up ahead. Politely ask any suspicious individuals to leave. If they refuse, you may use force!" Nie Yan ordered. Players would have to show respect to the might of the number one guild in Calore!

In the previous timeline, Victorious Return was the tyrant of Calore. Many players had grievances with them, but there was nothing they could do. As long as a guild had enough power, they would never have to worry about lacking new members. When conducting work, offending a few players was inevitable.

Paladin of the Elegy immediately carried out Nie Yan's orders. He selected 200 Thieves suitable for the task. The selected Thieves

dashed forward and disappeared into the thickets up ahead.

Chapter 394 - Obscurus Magic, Explosion Inferno!

Although 200 Thieves seemed like a lot, it was far from enough to scout out every inch of these forested hills. Trying to find only several dozen people in such an area was no different from fishing a needle out of a haystack.

Nie Yan wasn't the least bit suspicious. After all, no one in Calore was capable of opposing Asskickers United. Victorious Return was under heavy scrutiny, and Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors were too far away to pose any real threat.

Asskickers United was deeply rooted into Calore, with roughly one out of every ten players having a relation with the guild. The moment anything happened, they would know. Informants were practically everywhere, so it was nigh impossible to escape their sights. This was why 2,000 players sufficed to transport the jars of Black Gunpowder.

The portal those six Shamans opened was a secret spell from the Shamic Temple, which was the hardest type of magic to guard against. Furthermore, they had already made ample preparations, having set up transfer points in Glory City long ago. They could teleport 50–60 players with each portal.

Bloodlust Blades had already been planning to attack Asskickers United's strongholds for a long time. But with the appearance of the Black Gunpowder, they were forced to slightly alter their plans. They would deal with the Black Gunpowder first!

Black Gunpowder was a military good that took up a lot of bagspace. The amount Nie Yan uncovered in Earl Kelfield's Castle could fill tens of thousands of bottles, a task which would take at least several days. The only feasible method was to transport it by hand. When transport caravans became available later on, things would become much more convenient.

Black Gunpowder had many applications and could be used to craft a variety of siege weapons, such as magic explosives, incendiary bolts, explosive projectiles, etc.

Although people had heard of siege weapons like Goblin Magic Cannons, blueprints for them were extremely hard to come by.

Nie Yan placed great importance on transporting these goods safely to United City. Even if these materials were only enough to craft one or two Goblin Magic Cannons, they were well worth the effort.

「Boss, it's safe up here. We bumped into a few players levelling, but we shooed them away.」

「Everything is clear on our side too.」

...

The 200 Thieves reported back one after another after scouting out their respective zones.

This information put Nie Yan's mind at ease. He glanced behind him and felt that putting all the Black Gunpowder in the same place was a bit too dangerous. After thinking for a moment, he decided to split the people carrying the Black Gunpowder into seven smaller groups and had a large number of Thieves and Warriors patrol the thickets around them to prevent anyone from getting close.

「Nie Yan, I just received word that all the top experts in Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors disappeared. They were gathered together in Glory City only 20 minutes ago. I had people monitor the transfer points in Calore, but we didn't discover them. Maybe they're doing a dungeon run or something?」 Guo Huai reported at this time. The top experts of three large guilds suddenly disappearing was too strange an occurrence. So, he immediately reported this information to Nie Yan.

Since those players didn't teleport to Calore, even if they rode on

the fastest mounts, it would take them at least seven hours to cover the distance between the two cities and enter Calore. As such, Guo Huai never considered the possibility of them suddenly launching an ambush. However, this news immediately roused Nie Yan's suspicions. How could it possibly be a coincidence that all the top experts in Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors would disappear at the same time his group was transporting the Black Gunpowder?

Conviction had all sorts of mysterious spells and items. Nie Yan couldn't eliminate the possibility those people obtained something that allowed players to teleport between cities without the use of transfer points.

「Tell all guild members who've finished their class advancement quests to come over here immediately! Also, send over a force of at least 5,000 players as back-up!」Nie Yan ordered in a grave tone.

Guo Huai was taken aback for a moment. But hearing Nie Yan's tone, he immediately understood the gravity of the situation. 「Understood, I'll get to it right away!」

As the 2,000 players carrying the Black Gunpowder travelled through the forested hills, Nie Yan swept his gaze over the dense foliage. It would be extremely simple to hide several dozen people here!

A sense of unease crept into Nie Yan's mind. 「Everyone, be on guard. We're preparing for battle!」

At this moment, the magic energy in the air vibrated. Nie Yan looked up ahead and saw a red cloud condense in the sky as flames started pouring down. The players closest to the spell immediately became restless.

“We're under attack!”

The players in the back were about to rush forward to provide support but were stopped by Nie Yan.

「Stop! Protect the Black Gunpowder!」Nie Yan shouted his orders. The only reason the enemy attacked the front of the group was in hopes of drawing away the players escorting the jars of Black Gunpowder from the back. They definitely had people hidden in other places.

Asskickers United's procession was extremely long. There were roughly 400 players opening the path up ahead, all of whom were around Level 45. Even though they couldn't compare to the top ranked members, they were far above ordinary players. Asskickers United didn't have a single trash player!

Seven players from Angel Corps, Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors suddenly appeared in front Nie Yan's group. There was an Arcane Mage, Holy Mage, Priest, Berserker, Paladin, and Elemental Shaman.

The Arcane Mage stood proudly atop a clifftop. He waved his staff as a series of cryptic syllables came out of his mouth. He was surging with magical energy as an unimaginably powerful spell condensed in the air.

Obscurus Magic, Explosion Inferno!

A single Advanced Magic could cover everything within a 100 meter radius of a targeted area. It certainly wasn't as easy to avoid as normal area-of-effect magic, not to mention the terrifying damage which few players could endure for more than a couple of seconds.

The group of Asskickers United players immediately erupted into an uproar. The five Paladins closest to the front activated Indomitable Will and charged toward the Arcane Mage. They had to stop him at all costs; otherwise, most of the 400 players at the front of the procession would be wiped out.

Another six Warriors followed behind the five Paladins.

Advanced Magic generally required two sets of syllables to cast,

or in other words roughly 20 seconds. If one of the Paladins could get within 5 meters of the Arcane Mage to cast Silence, the Advanced Magic would be interrupted.

Seeing Asskickers United's people charging towards them, the several players beside the Arcane Mage naturally didn't stay idle.

The Elemental Shaman waved his staff and summoned a Windfury Totem. After which he spat out several words in the orcish language as electricity surged around his hand. He shot three lightning bolts at one of the Paladins.「Bang! Bang! Bang」

-856!

-847!

-889!

The Paladin was sent flying and crashed into a nearby tree.

It was an instant kill!

Windfury Totem increased the critical rate of all nearby allies to 100%.

This Elemental Shaman's reaction speed was quite quick. The several nearby players from Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors couldn't help but be surprised. Players from Angel Corps were really something else.

“Lunatic, we can't let Angel Corps show us! Come on, let's show off our skills!” a Berserker shouted before charging into the Paladins.

“Understood!” The Holy Mage waved his staff and buffed himself with several spells that increased Holy Magic damage before attacking one of the Paladins with Holy Judgement.

-2,321!

「Bang!」The Paladin was blasted away. It was another instant kill!

The Holy Mage stood there with a blank expression on his face.

Even he was shocked by how much damage he dealt. He glanced at the Windfury Totem floating beside him. It only looked like a piece of carved wood. Who knew it had such a powerful effect!

“Sweet! Darkwing, your Windfury Totem is amazing!” the Holy Mage exclaimed. Only a Windfury Totem with a skill level of five or higher could have such an effect. He waved his staff and cast Light’s Judgement.「Bang!」Another Paladin was sent flying.

Lunatic had already class advanced to a Great Holy Mage, so he already dealt a lot of damage to players who hadn’t yet class advanced. With the buff from Windfury Totem, he could directly one-shot them!

Charge!

Charge!

The Warriors from Asskickers United charged up the hill toward the enemy.

The Berserker let out a roar and rushed up to greet them, holding off three of them on his own.

Whirlwind Slash!

“Stop the Paladins, don’t let them silence Starbright!” the Berserker reminded. He roared and activated Seismic Slam, knocking the three Warriors back.

“Don’t worry, we’ve got this!” Darkwing said. He waved his staff.

Polymorph!

A Warrior who had just arrived in front of Darkwing was struck by the spell and shrunk into a frog.

Darkwing no longer cared for the Warrior after turning him into a frog and moved onto his next target.

One of the Paladins managed to get close to the Arcane Mage Starbright. Just as he was about to cast Silence, the Holy Mage activated Repel and forced him several meters back. The Paladin

failed to cast Silence!

Although this was the first time these people were cooperating together, as top-ranked players, their senses were top-notch. They could understand their teammate's intentions even when pressed for time.

The spells from Asskickers United's Mages started flying over in their direction. The Priest and Paladin immediately started healing Starbright and the others.

"These bastards are tougher than we thought! Be careful, watch your health!" the Paladin said as he healed the Berserker.

The Berserker's health rapidly fell. The Paladin's healing couldn't keep up, forcing the Berserker to down an Intermediate Health Potion. He then struck out with a Crippling Strike, immobilizing one of the Warriors that was charging over before quickly pulling back.

These seven players were like fish in the water during this high-level battle, not slipping up in the slightest.

Twenty seconds was a fairly short amount of time. By the time Asskickers United's players had noticed Starbright's presence, eight seconds had already passed. Time had passed in a blink of an eye. They could barely react before they heard the Arcane Mage chant out the final syllable.

Explosion Inferno!

Chapter 395 - Lightning Storm!

Black flames started falling from the sky. What started out initially as a light drizzle of flames quickly turned into a torrential downpour, transforming everything within a 100-meter radius into a raging sea of fire.

A blanket of damage values rose up into the sky as players collapsed in droves inside this hellish purgatory. Everything within Explosion Inferno's sphere of influence was burned to ash.

Almost all of the 400 Asskickers United players at the front were wiped out, with only a few survivors that happened to be at the very edge of the spell's radius escaping in time.

The Elemental Shaman Darkwing narrowed his eyes when he noticed silhouettes darting out from the flames to his left. He waved his staff and sent out a bolt of lightning, which arced between the seven low-health players from Asskickers United and killed them instantly.

The Holy Mage blasted out spells in quick succession. Although the Windfury Totem had disappeared, he still had more than enough damage to finish off the straggling low-health survivors.

Explosion Inferno lasted a total of ten ticks before finally ending. Starbright jumped off the ledge and grouped up with his comrades, his name glowing crimson red.

"I killed 288 players. Weaklings! No challenge at all," Starbright remarked.

The seven of them had mowed down more than 300 players from Asskickers United without breaking a sweat.

Even though these members of Asskickers United were superior to the average player, they were inferior to peak players like Starbright and his group in terms of overall stats, level, gear quality, timing, or skill knowledge. When a top expert took the

field, ordinary players could only serve as cannon fodder, regardless of the disparity in numbers.

“Don’t underestimate the enemy. The ones we just faced are the most ordinary out of the bunch. Remember, prudence guides a ship for 10,000 years,” Darkwing warned somberly, not allowing the adrenaline get to his head. He knew the true battle was just beginning!

“So what? The only threat here is Nirvana Flame. All of the top experts in Asskickers United are busy doing their class advancement quests. Let’s see just how strong he really is!” Starbright arrogantly replied, playing around with a ball of black flames in his palm. He was already picturing himself basking in the glory and fame, and collecting the fat reward, for killing the Mad Rogue.

No one could resist the allure of riches and fame. Starbright was no exception.

At this moment, Asskickers United was attempting to fend off attacks on all four sides by groups of class advanced players from Bloodlust Blades, Alliances of Mages, Divine Protectors, and Angel Corps. Each group contained between 8–12 players.

The players from Asskickers United fell into a panic as the enemy gnawed away at their ranks.

“Protect the Black Gunpowder!” Nie Yan personally took command of 500 players in guarding the seven of the jars.

With Nie Yan’s permission, Paladin of the Elegy started dispatching orders to all of the smaller squads. Nie Yan noticed that he worked surprisingly well under pressure and had a knack for commanding.

He was pleasantly surprised by this development, and remained close by to provide assistance in the event that Paladin of the Elegy slipped up.

Paladin of the Elegy couldn't help but be nervous with Nie Yan right beside him. But he still issued orders with a cool head.

Nie Yan glanced thoughtfully at Paladin of the Elegy. They had only interacted a few times before this, and Nie Yan didn't think much of him until recently. Now, it dawned on him that Paladin of the Elegy was a diamond in the rough, and one that was worth polishing.

"Boss, we lost 300 players at the front!" Paladin of the Elegy called out, wiping off the cold sweat that had appeared on his forehead. He was still trying to wrap his mind around that instant where all of those Level 45 players were crushed.

"How many attackers were there?" Nie Yan asked. The actions of the enemy so far were pretty straightforward.

"Seven, they cast an Advanced Magic," Paladin of the Elegy replied. He had watched a video of Undying Scoundrel using a similarly destructive area-of-effect spell to slaughter the players from Victorious Return. He reveled in schadenfreude back then. Now that the shoe was on the other foot, he fell into despair.

"Ah, no wonder." Nie Yan calmly patted Paladin of the Elegy on the shoulder. "It's just one Advanced Magic, nothing to get nervous over. They'll be a common sight in future battlefields."

Nie Yan's calm and confident attitude flowed into Paladin of the Elegy, subconsciously influencing him and calming him down.

Area of effect magic was flying everywhere as the procession received attacks from all directions. The players from Asskickers United gallantly fought back and managed to kill several enemies with their counterattacks.

"Everyone, protect the Black Gunpowder!" Around 200 Asskickers United players stood guard over two jars of Black Gunpowder.

At this moment, the air rippled to reveal the position of an

Elementalist hidden nearby. Red specks of light converged around him as he chanted out one incantation syllable after another. He was casting an area-of-effect fire spell!

“Paladins, stop him!”

The Paladins rushed forward, preparing to end the Elementalist’s incantation with a Silence.

Several Warriors from Bloodlust Blades formed a wall to intercept the Paladins and prevent them from reaching the Elementalist. Their barricade proved to be futile, as one of the Paladins activated Indomitable Will and broke through the blockade.

The Elementalist neared the end of his chant, the red light around the tip of his staff glowing ever brighter, signifying that he was a heartbeat away from unleashing his spell.

Silence!

The ominous convergence of the red specks of light at the tip of the Elementalist’s staff dissipated into the void, leaving him impotent, blank-faced, and unable to comprehend how this had happened. He was a mere millisecond away from raining his fire and fury down upon the world before the Paladin stopped him! To make matters worse, more than half of his mana was consumed in that failed casting and his spell was now on cooldown.

“You did it, Lil’ Slick!”

“Slick, you’re awesome!”

The players from Asskickers United cheered. The Silence, just in the nick of time, from the Paladin known as Lil’ Slick had saved them disaster.

However, their celebrations didn’t last long. Five players from Alliance of Mages appeared behind them. An Arcane Mage waved his staff, sending a blazing meteor of arcane fire hurtling down on them. It was also an area-of-effect spell!

Many Asskickers United players collapsed to the ground.

The two jars of Black Gunpowder were also in imminent danger as the wards protecting them groaned and faded in the onslaught. Web-like cracks spread through the surface of the jars. Then they shattered, allowing the flames to make contact with the gunpowder inside.

「Boom!」

A massive explosion enveloped everything within a 100-meter radius, killing any player caught in the blast. All that remained visible were raging black flames, and a direful mushroom cloud in the sky.

Asskickers United lost close to 300 players. Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors also suffered one or two casualties.

Even those not within the immediate range of the blast were almost knocked off their feet. They stared at that mushroom cloud with pale faces.

This was the destructive power of Black Gunpowder!

Every jar contained approximately 20 lbs of Black Gunpowder. Two jars were enough to wreck a city wall!

“Boss, two jars!” Paladin of the Elegy reported. He felt his heart ache. A single jar of Black Gunpowder was worth a minimum of 10,000 gold on the marketplace, more expensive than a piece of Sub Legendary-grade equipment!

Nie Yan also felt the loss, even though it was only two jars.

It was impossible for Nie Yan to disrupt the enemy’s momentum and turn the tide by himself. He had to focus all his efforts on protecting the jars of Black Gunpowder. As long as he could hold out until Bladelight, Smoke Stub, Young Seven and the rest of them arrived, everything would be fine.

A chaotic battle raged on on another side of the battlefield. Bloodlust Mad Blade took the lead as he charged into a group of six players from Asskickers United, relying on his superior gear to sweep through everything in his path. He slashed down with Cleave and sent one of them flying out, while knocking the others aside with his Charge.

A distance of more than 50 meters separated Mad Blade from Nie Yan. His eyes brimmed with murderous frenzy.

Nirvana Flame, we finally meet!

The chain of events in the recent past had pushed Bloodlust Blades to the brink of collapse. Mad Blade's hatred had already seeped into the marrow of his bones. He wished for nothing more than to flay Nie Yan's flesh and strip his skin, a feeling that only intensified now that he could see the source of his grievances with his own eyes.

Nie Yan lifted his head and instantly saw Mad Blade through the haze of battle. Although they had never met, he knew instantly this player was Bloodlust Mad Blade, the guild leader of Bloodlust Blades!

Mad Blade was large and tall. He was clad in dark armour forged from elven steel, armed to the teeth, and resembled an iron fortress with no visible weakness. He wielded a two-handed greatsword that was roughly five-fingers wide, more suited for smashing than slicing.

He never expected to meet Mad Blade here. Perhaps enemies really were destined to be on a narrow path!

Nie Yan pointed his dagger right at Mad Blade and beckoned him, indicating that he was ready for the fight. There was no opponent he was afraid of!

Mad Blade swung his greatsword out wildly in a Whirlwind Slash, dealing close to a thousand damage to the six Asskickers

United players around him. Then he screamed, giving voice to the madness and fury entwined within, before slamming his sword into the ground.

Seismic Slam!

「Bang!」A powerful shock wave erupted from Mad Blade as he sent the players from Asskickers United flying backwards. They crashed to the ground and never rose again.

A white light fell over Mad Blade, healing him back to full health.

Mad Blade began slaughtering a path towards Nie Yan, his eyes were bloodshot as he lost himself in his fury.

Players from Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, and Divine Protectors rushed to Mad Blade's side. Including the three Elemental Shamans, there were 11 players in Mad Blade's group.

Nie Yan had over 500 players by his side protecting seven jars of Black Gunpowder.

Sparks flew as the two sides glared at each other, both ready for the moment that would ignite this battle!

This showdown between Nie Yan and Mad Blade was predestined!

One of them was going to die today!

“Coldflame, do it!” Mad Blade ordered in a deep tone as he stared daggers at Nie Yan. An azure-robed Elementalist raised his staff and started chanting out cryptic syllables. Without a doubt, he was casting Advanced Magic!

Sparks of electricity flickered as specks of light rapidly converged on Cold Flame. It was the Elemental Hall Magic, Lightning Storm!

Lightning could also ignite the Black Gunpowder!

Chapter 396 - Illusion Steps

Lightning Storm was a Rank 2 Elemental Hall Magic with a radius of 75 meters.

Most spells classified as Advanced Magic possessed an immense destructive power and were unparalleled at killing players. Only certain special life saving skills could allow a player to escape from one.

A cryptic chant flowed out of Cold Flame's mouth as if he were counting down the seconds to the day of reckoning. As soon as the last syllable left his mouth, a cataclysm would descend upon the world!

A sparse 20 seconds remained before Cold Flame completed his incantation. Every second that passed brought Nie Yan's group one step closer to doom!

"Paladins, stop that Elementalist! Warriors, open up a path!" Nie Yan ordered, his tone grim. He feared the ordinary members of Asskickers United were no match for who they were about to face. 20 seconds simply wasn't enough time! He swept his gaze over the players on the side of Mad Blade. All class advanced, this will be tough... I guess it's up to me. He activated stealth, and his silhouette slowly faded into the background.

Charge!

Indomitable Will!

More than 30 Warriors and Paladins rushed out towards Mad Blade and his group with a single purpose in mind. Preventing Cold Flame from casting Lightning Storm!

"All trash!" Starbright snorted. Anyone below Level 50 was nothing more than an ant in the eyes of a class advanced player. He waved his staff and fired out an Arcane Flame Burst.

「Bang!」The Arcane Flame Burst arced in a parabola and smashed

into one of the Paladins, blasting him backwards until he crashed into a tree, killing him instantly.

Starbright appeared absolutely domineering with his superior level, gear, and stats.

What a powerful attack!

“Did you already forget about us? As if we’d let you cast Silence so easily!” The three Shamans each placed down a different totem, greatly buffing the stats of Mad Blade and the others.

Chain Lightning!

Three bolts of lightning crackled through the air and struck the Paladins and Warriors from Asskickers United. Thankfully, the Priests in the back provided timely support and prevented them from dying.

Paladin of the Elegy scanned the battlefield before giving out an order in voice chat,「All Mages, take down the Elementalist and Shaman over there!」

The Mages raised their staffs and sent a shower of spells flying towards the Shaman.

Seeing that things weren’t looking good, the Shaman wanted to turn tail and flee, but it was already too late.

Despair filled his eyes as more than 30 spells rained down on him and blasted him into oblivion.

The Elementalist also suffered a similar fate.

Even if they were stronger, they still wouldn’t be able to survive such an intense barrage!

Mad Blade was holding off seven Warriors and Paladins by himself. He let out a deep roar and struck the ground with his sword set ablaze.

Flame Quake!

Fissures spewing scorching flames snaked through the terrain and blasted the Warriors and Paladins back, dealing over 1,000 damage to all of them.

Mad Blade looked around, but he couldn't find any trace of Nie Yan. An intense feeling of danger arose in his heart.

Mad Blade had watched videos of Nie Yan's past exploits before. His speed was so breathtaking that a certain phrase started spreading on the forums, "When Nirvana Flame draws his dagger, he'll never miss his target!"

"Priests, cast Illuminate!" Mad Blade ordered.

Dazzling rays of light shone down on the ground and revealed a silhouette dashing towards Cold Flame at an incredible speed.

Since Cold Flame started his chant, roughly 10 seconds had passed.

There was no time to dally. Regardless of the cost, Nie Yan had to take down Cold Flame first!

"Protect Cold Flame!" Mad Blade shouted. He tried to run to Cold Flame, but all the Warriors and Paladins from Asskickers United clung onto his feet and dragged him down. He had no way of disengaging!

"Nirvana Flame!" Starbright activated Arcane Gaze. His pupils glimmered with a deep violet flame as a dashing silhouette appeared in his vision. "Die!"

He waved his staff and fired an ominous black beam at Nie Yan. Then he fetched a Junior Shadow Bind Scroll from his bag.

「Poof!」He crushed the scroll, sending shadowy hands stretching towards Nie Yan.

Sensing something off, Nie Yan raised his head and spotted Starbright standing close to Cold Flame. This fellow had timed his attacks pretty well!

“Success!” Starbright cried out gleefully. “I guess the Mad Rogue only amounts to this m-” The smug look on his face immediately froze when he saw Nie Yan block his perfectly timed spell combination with Gale Step.

Seeing Nie Yan fast approaching, Starbright quickly pulled back. He counted down the seconds in his mind, waiting for the invincibility of Gale Step to wear off, before waving his staff and casting Repel!

A powerful repelling force swept outwards.

Starbright could at least count on Repel to push Nie Yan back!

A nearby Paladin activated Eyes of the Divine, then charged towards Nie Yan’s silhouette with Indomitable Will.

There were three players barring Nie Yan’s path, Starbright, a Fighter, and a Paladin.

Cold Flame continued to chant. His voice was slightly hoarse and carried an ominous cadence as if he were beckoning forth spirits from the other realm.

Another five seconds had passed. The lightning elements surrounding Cold Flame grew even denser as sparks flickered around him. Paladin of the Elegy was getting increasingly anxious and ordered everyone to retreat.

Paladin of the Elegy glanced behind him with a pained look. Were seven jars of Black Gunpowder really going to disappear just like that?

Dammit! Paladin of the Elegy’s eyes were red. He knew just how important these jars of Black Gunpowder were to Asskickers United. How would he have the face to return to his fellow guildmates and Watchful Snail? After all, it was Guo Huai who had put him in charge of the group tasked with helping Nie Yan.

Paladin of the Elegy placed all of his hopes on Nie Yan. He prayed a miracle would happen!

It wasn't over til the fat lady sang!

Just as the force wave from Repel was about to hit him, Nie Yan activated Holy Descent from the Medal of the Ten Holy Paladins, making him magic immunity for three seconds and increasing his movement speed by 20%!

Nie Yan wasn't slowed down in the slightest as he dashed through the force wave. He was actually so fast that he left behind a trail of afterimages. There were only a few seconds left until Lightning Storm was cast. If he were any slower, he would be too late! In this high pressure moment, where he was utilizing all his stats to their fullest, he had an epiphany.

His footwork suddenly blurred as his speed broke past its limits.

"Why didn't Repel work!?" Starbright cried out in alarm after seeing Repel fail to push Nie Yan back, let alone slow him down.

Divine Strike!

The Paladin came slashing down at Nie Yan with his sword.

"Haha, it landed!" The Paladin had an elated look on his face, only for it to turn into shock when he realized the Nie Yan he had hit was merely an illusion.

The Paladin only felt a breeze brush past his ears. Nie Yan had already long dashed past him.

Nie Yan had recalled Sun's demonstration of the Illusion Steps countless times in his head. It was only just now that everything suddenly clicked, allowing him to evade the Paladin's Divine Strike.

Like a phantom, his movements were illusory and unpredictable, making it difficult for enemies to track him.

By the time the Paladin reacted, it was already too late.

Just as Starbright was about to raise his staff, Nie Yan had disappeared from his vision, having long since dashed past him.

So fast!

This was precisely the speed of the Mad Rogue!

The only obstacle left in Nie Yan's path was the Fighter. Seeing Nie Yan dashing up, the Fighter let out a roar.

Charge!

Intercept!

He charged up to Nie Yan with his sword raised.

The fact that all these players could successfully class advance immediately upon reaching Level 50 meant they ranked among the very top of the player base. An expert had an expert's pride! How could he stand for an enemy toying with them like this!

Flame Slash! The Fighter's sword ignited flames as it chopped down on Nie Yan, combining three skills together to unleash incredible might.

Nie Yan could feel the blazing heat of the blade on his skin. Just as the Flame Slash was about to land on his body, he activated Shadow Waltz and blocked the attack. Then he dashed past the Fighter.

Not good! The Fighter trembled. Cold Flame was right behind him still in the middle of chanting Lightning Storm. If Nie Yan was allowed to get close to him, the outcome was obvious!

By the time the Fighter turned around, it was too late.

Nie Yan had dashed past the three players blocking his way without a scratch, closing the gap between him and Cold Flame in mere seconds. The other nearby players had no time to react.

Three seconds, two seconds, one second... When the last syllable was about to exit Cold Flame's mouth, Nie Yan's foot came flying at him.

If Nie Yan had used any other skill, it would've been too late. Thankfully, his legs had a longer reach than his arms.

「Thud!」Cold Flame was kicked several meters back. However, the spell hadn't been interrupted, only slightly delayed. He attempted to continue chanting.

The Kicking mastery had a certain chance of disrupting an enemy mid-cast, but most of the time it would only delay them. Cold Flame's cast of Lightning Storm had been pushed back by three seconds.

However, Nie Yan was already right in front of him. He simply didn't have the three uninterrupted seconds required to cast the spell!

Nie Yan dashed forth and struck Cold Flame in the forehead with Concussive Blow, stopping the cast of Lightning Storm.

Success! Nie Yan smirked.

Chapter 397 - Apocalyptic Extinction

The berserk lightning slowly dissipated before disappearing entirely, giving way to a clear blue sky. It was peaceful and calming, like the feeling of respite after a particularly rocky storm. The players from Asskickers United breathed a sigh of relief. They were saved.

If it wasn't for Nie Yan pulling off a miracle against all odds, an endless storm of lightning would've undoubtedly taken all their lives.

None of them held any hope of surviving the unparalleled might of a Rank 2 Elemental Hall Magic like Lightning Storm.

“Fuck!” Mad Blade couldn't help but curse after witnessing Nie Yan stop Cold Flame from casting Lightning Storm. “Kill that bastard! Don't let him get away!”

A barrage of spells flew toward Nie Yan. As a group of top elites, how could they allow him to escape so easily?

Cut Throat!

After stunning Cold Flame, Nie Yan slashed him across the neck with Zennarde's Sword.

-1,702!

Critical hit! Nie Yan emptied all the remaining life from Cold Flame's health bar, killing him instantly!

Cold Flame collapsed on the ground. He was a squishy cloth-armoured Elementalist, so it was no surprise Nie Yan felled him in a single blow.

At this moment, eight spells rained down on Nie Yan. If he were hit by so many spells, he would undoubtedly be blasted into oblivion!

Nie Yan had just recently used Gale Step and Shadow Waltz, so

both of them were on cooldown. Mad Blade refused to believe he possessed a third life-saving skill.

Nie Yan was dead for certain!

Life-saving skills were extremely pricey. For the vast majority of players, obtaining even one would be impressive. A second was a matter of luck. And a third meant that that bastard had to be some kind of cheat character!

Nie Yan was precisely that, a cheat character. Although he didn't actually have a third life-saving skill, he had Quick Reset, which could directly reset the cooldown of any ordinary skill!

Besides Quick Reset, Nie Yan still had Adjudicator of God at hand!

In terms of skill arsenal, Nie Yan had more than enough to spare!

Nie Yan reset the cooldown of Shadow Waltz.

It looked like Nie Yan was going to be obliterated in the next moment, and his undefeated streak as the Mad Rogue would finally come to an end! Everyone's hearts tightened.

Mad Blade coldly watched on with a smirk on his face. "Let's see you try and act arrogant again!"

Shadow Waltz!

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」A hail of spells ruthlessly bombarded Nie Yan.

When the dust and smoke settled, to everyone's shock Nie Yan wasn't a corpse lying on the ground.

Their eyes were wide like saucers.

"Fuck! This guy actually has a third life-saving skill?" Mad Blade cursed loudly. This fellow was becoming increasingly ludicrous in his eyes. His visions of killing Nie Yan had gone up in a puff of smoke.

With three life-saving skills and his excellent awareness, killing

Nie Yan was practically impossible. The only way was to ambush him with thousands of players like before!

Seeing Nie Yan escape the bombardment unscathed, the players from Asskickers United immediately erupted in cheers.

“Brothers, the boss just showed off his skills! We can’t lose face for Asskickers United either! So what if they’re stronger than us? Let’s mob these bastards to death!” Paladin of the Elegy cried out, then pointed his sword at Mad Blade. “It’s time to return the favour! Mages, blast his ass back to Glory City!”

More than 80 Mages raised their staffs and took aim at Mad Blade. A dense hail of spells whizzed through the air.

Mad Blade’s face paled immediately, and he hurriedly activated God’s Descent. His skin glowed with a lime-green radiance, and his health rose to 3,600. More importantly, his magic resistance increased significantly. He also activated a shielding spell as a black barrier of light enveloped him.

God’s Descent was an Advanced Skill. As the guild leader of Bloodlust Blades, Mad Blade naturally had a hidden trump card or two.

「Bang! Bang! Bang!」One spell after another bombarded Mad Blade, dealing roughly 10 or so damage each. Even so, he was still constantly being pushed back. A moment later, the black barrier protecting him violently shuddered before shattering like glass. The damage he received instantly increased by eightfold.

One healing spell after another fell over Mad Blade while one Priest hurriedly gave him a barrier.

“Boss, we need to leave now. It’ll be too late if we don’t! Three Blades and them have spotted several of Asskickers United’s top players heading over here! We also received reports of more than 5,000 of their players moving to surround us!” Starbright shouted anxiously. Right now, he no longer had any delusions of trying to

kill Nie Yan. Even if he had more control skills, he knew it would still be a futile effort.

Around 500 players were left to guard the jars of Black Gunpowder while the rest were charging over.

With only around a dozen or so people, even if they were stronger individually, they would still end up smothered to death. A group of 200 players was a force to be reckoned with, especially given the caliber of the enemy. Without powerful area-of-effect magic, they absolutely weren't a match in a direct confrontation.

It was still possible to cast Advanced Magic in the beginning since they had caught the enemy off guard. But now that the players from Asskickers United had had the time to react, with more than 200 players swarming towards them, it was impossible! After all, there were only so many Paladins they could stop from casting Silence.

The dazzling explosion of spells left Mad Blade unable to open his eyes. It was already impressive enough that he could endure such an intense bombardment for this long.

At this moment, several silhouettes appeared out of the thickets. They were Sun, Smoke Stub, Bladelight, and the others! All of them spread out through the battlefield.

Nie Yan surveyed the battlefield before focusing his attention on a figure in the distance. He was determined to make sure Mad Blade didn't leave this battlefield alive today!

"Everyone, retr-" Mad Blade shouted. But before he could even finish his sentence, a sharp dagger struck him in the back of the head.

Nie Yan had been lurking in the shadows, waiting for his skills to come off cooldown. Seeing Mad Blade blinded and pushed back by the bombardment of magic, he took advantage of the opportunity to circle behind him. He activated Apocalyptic Extinction, then

struck Mad Blade in the back of the head with Smothering Strike.

A small jingle rang out. Nie Yan glanced at his skill bar and discovered that his Smothering Strike had finally ranked up!

Smothering Strike was one of the few skills that could rank up. It wasn't a frequently used skill, so few people knew what happened when it did rank up. Its proficiency could only be increased under very specific circumstances, which didn't become common knowledge in the previous timeline until many players were well over Level 100. At that time, numerous players would look for places to train their Smothering Strike.

Smothering Strike (Intermediate): Strike an enemy from behind and stun them for seven seconds. The target will awaken from the stun if attacked after the initial 2 seconds. Cooldown: 60 seconds.

The effects of the upgraded version of Smothering Strike were pretty decent. Nie Yan wondered how powerful it would be at Advanced and Specialist.

Mad Blade's attention was wholly focused on defending against the barrage of spells, so he naturally failed to sense Nie Yan's approach. By the time he was hit, it was already too late.

Nie Yan was ruthless. Were it just the Smothering Strike, Mad Blade might have been able to survive. However, Nie Yan had also activated Apocalyptic Extinction and inflicted Mad Blade with a myriad of curses, causing his stats to plummet. His barrier shattered, and he started taking 300–400 damage from each of the spells.

At this point, Mad Blade couldn't endure no matter how much health he had. Even God's Descent couldn't save him.

Although God's Descent provided some protection, the curses from Apocalyptic Extinction were simply too powerful and cut Mad Blade's defenses by more than half.

When the several Priests and Shamans saw Mad Blade in danger,

they quickly raised their staffs to heal him. But it was already too late.

As the dense barrage of magic ruthlessly pummeled Mad Blade, he could endure no longer and was blasted backwards into the air. When several dozen spells hit him at the same time, dealing 300–400 damage each, it was no different from an instant kill.

Seeing Mad Blade sent flying, Nie Yan's lips cracked into a satisfied smile. He reentered stealth and dashed toward his next target.

“Hurry! Use your Random Transfer Scrolls!” Starbright shouted. Just as the words left his mouth, he felt a cold chill nip at the back of his neck.

It was Nie Yan! He was taking action again!

Starbright reached into his bag and grabbed for a Random Transfer Scroll as fast as he could while retreating backwards. However, he was still too slow!

Intimidate! Nie Yan pounced toward Starbright like a cheetah hunting its prey.

Starbright immediately felt an intense wave of fear wash over him as his body stiffened. Just as he was about to crush the Random Transfer Scroll, Nie Yan struck him in the forehead with a Concussive Blow.

“Dammit, so fast...” Starbright muttered before his vision turned white. Nie Yan's speed left him with no time to react. A second or two more, and he could've escaped with the Random Transfer Scroll.

His previous thoughts of wanting to PK Nie Yan seemed like nothing more than a joke now. Putting aside the fact that Mages were innately at a disadvantage against Thieves, he was simply no match for Nie Yan in terms of skill or game sense.

Nie Yan circled behind and followed through with a Backstab and

Lacerate. Starbright's body powerlessly slumped onto the ground.

The players from Bloodlust Blades, Alliance of Mages, Divine Protectors, and Angel Corps all crushed their Random Transfer Scrolls and disappeared from the battlefield.

They had prepared to great extent for this operation, with every single one of them carrying a Random Transfer Scroll. Such a rare item wasn't something that would be used casually. Even Asskickers United only had a few hundred stockpiled.

In spite of the enemy's ambush, Asskickers United had come out on top in this battle. Even though the damage they suffered wasn't small, they had also killed more than 20 of the enemy's top elites and looted over a dozen pieces of equipment from their corpses. All in all, it couldn't be considered too big of a loss.

Chapter 398 - Cao Xu!

Of the equipment collected, more than 10 pieces were Level 50 Dark Gold-grade, each with an estimated market value of at least 1,000 gold. There were another 70 pieces with decent properties that would sell for a significant sum too.

All the equipment the players from Asskickers United dropped had been retrieved.

“What are our casualties?” Nie Yan asked.

Paladin of the Elegy did a headcount. “We lost around 1,000 people. Most of them died to area-of-effect magic.”

“How many jars of Black Gunpowder were destroyed?” Nie Yan asked. He had heard several explosions during the battle.

“Five. the remaining ones are all accounted for,” Paladin of the Elegy replied in a somewhat guilty tone. Even though most of the jars were safe, they had still lost enough of them that he didn’t have the face to report back to Guo Huai.

The remaining jars of Black Gunpowder were all neatly gathered together. Transporting so many of them at once was by no means an easy feat. Each jar contained 20 lbs of gunpowder. Including the weight of the jar, that was 30 lbs altogether. Even the strongest Warriors would eventually get tired after transporting such heavy goods. And since having two people carry a jar at the same time wasn’t really practical, the only solution was to have people take shifts.

“It’s fine, five jars isn’t too big of a loss,” Nie Yan comforted Paladin of the Elegy. There were still 17 jars of Black Gunpowder remaining, enough to last them until they could produce their own.

Sun, Bladelight, and the others approached Nie Yan. There were over 30 top-ranking players from Asskickers United altogether.

Were it not for their arrival, the forces ambushing them might not have left so willingly.

“We were late,” Bladelight said apologetically. When they were rushing over on horseback, they had heard the sounds of explosions in the distance. At that time, they were extremely anxious and feared all the jars of Black Gunpowder had been destroyed.

“Better late than never.” Nie Yan chuckled. Even though the loss of five jars pained him, it was still better than losing everything.

Nie Yan decided to have the transport team stay put until reinforcements arrived. They only had around 1,000 players remaining. It would be troublesome if they encountered another ambush.

After a while, the 5,000 players Guo Huai dispatched as reinforcements arrived, immediately bolstering the strength of the transport group. Only then did they resume their trek to United City.

About an hour later, Nie Yan and the others finally arrived at United City. United City was connected to the Cripps Stronghold via a transfer point, allowing them to teleport the jars of Black Gunpowder between both places.

Guo Huai recruited 5 Advanced Tinkerers, 1 Advanced Alchemist, 2 Advanced Runecrafters, and 1 Advanced Enchanter and had them all sign non-disclosure agreements. A secret workshop in the Cripps Stronghold was specially prepared for them, and they were provided with ample resources to help them get settled in.

Nie Yan handed over the Goblin Magic Cannon Blueprints (Rank 1) to them, whereupon they immediately got to work. In an estimated six days, Asskickers United would have their first Goblin Magic Cannon.

Nie Yan looked around the secret workshop. It was located deep

underground right behind the guild headquarters with only a single secret entrance. The interior was a gorgeous and spacious hall. There was no sense of claustrophobia at all. All sorts of crafting tools and appliances were placed throughout the hall, along with several hundred kinds of materials which were restocked on the daily. The nine players who had reached the Advanced rank in their respective crafting professions were all busily working.

After everything was prepared, only then did Nie Yan feel at ease. Checking the server clock, it was time to log off.

Nie Yan took off his game helmet and crawled out of bed.

It was a brand new morning. Today was Xie Yao's birthday. Her birthday party would be taking place at the Dragonsoar Financial Group owned Moro River Banquet Hall at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. All of Xie Yao's close relatives and family friends would be attending. Nie Yan felt a bit nervous, but he knew he would have to meet Xie Yao's parents eventually, so he forcefully calmed himself.

Nie Yan pondered on what sort of gift he should get Xie Yao. He made a trip to a jewelry store and finally settled on a necklace.

Driving to his father's company, memories of old and new filled his mind. He had already received the acceptance letter from the Top Military Academy. He could choose to enter any one of the two Ace departments, Command or Interstellar Travel. This was a privilege allowed only to those who ranked in the top three. In this life, he had fulfilled his father's only dream. There were no more regrets.

When Nie Yan arrived at his father's company, he went to chat with Ah Chen. The growth of the War God Tribe was progressing smoothly, having recently captured one of the strongholds belonging to a guild under the Tuoba Family. This was only the start of their campaign to take over Nisode City.

The War God Tribe's rise to glory was nothing short of amazing. There were several more newcomers rising up in other cities, the most famous of which were the God Punisher Sword and Darkbright Empire guilds.

Nie Yan recalled their names. God Punisher Sword was a guild based in Moonlight City. They were still weak, for now. It would take at least a month for them to solidify their foundation. As for Darkbright Empire, they were a Calore-based guild in the previous timeline. He believed his interference in this life had caused them to disappear from the river of history. Who knew they had run off to Blaze City, and it seemed they were doing even better than they ever had in the previous timeline.

History had deviated greatly ever since Nie Yan returned to the past.

It appeared Asskickers United would have many rivals in the future.

Nie Yan hung around at his father's company until the clock struck one before driving to the Moro River Banquet Hall.

With a six star rating, the Moro River Banquet Hall was the most famous restaurant in Huahai. It was a sleek building with a total of 167 floors, each floor capable of rotating independently. The floors could also be combined and altered with ease, allowing for the perfect view of the scenery outside. Just below was the biggest commercial street in the world. The moro in the name was taken from a religious scripture and meant dream. Every shop on the street had a unique design and displayed all sorts of fantastical oddities, making one feel as though they'd been transported to a magical world.

This was a place for the rich. Just the Moro River Banquet Hall alone was valued in the excess of several hundred billion. This gave an idea of how powerful the Dragonsoar Financial Group was. Even all of the Nie Family's assets combined wouldn't amount to

an odd scrap of the Dragonsoar Financial Group's capital.

Nie Yan arrived at the entrance and showed his invitation. A woman in a qipao came up to greet him.

"Sir, please follow me," she said in a melodic tone.

"Okay." Nie Yan nodded before following behind her.

The woman led Nie Yan to an elevator, where they rode up to the 131st floor. After passing through a red carpet lined corridor, he arrived at a large banquet hall. Even though it was still early, there were many people present. They were chatting and smiling with each other. The men were dressed in suits while the women wore gorgeous flower dresses. It wouldn't be unreasonable to say that practically all of Huahai high-class elites from both the government and business world were gathered here.

This banquet hall would have no problem fitting several thousand people. Nie Yan walked around but didn't see any familiar faces. So, he found a secluded corner by a window and sat down.

This was the first time Nie Yan had participated in such an extravagant event. He was a good-for-nothing in his prior life, so his father naturally didn't bring him to these sorts of gatherings. When his father passed away, he had even less of a chance of going.

Even though he felt a little out of place, Nie Yan remained clam. He ordered a glass of juice and stared out the window. He could see the beautiful sea in the distance, where azure waters met clear blue skies.

Nie Yan's gaze wandered around the hall. As for how many of these immaculately dressed upper-class elites were gathered here, he couldn't tell. There was no lack of beautiful women, each alluring figure clothed in skin-tight, low-back halterneck dresses. It was like a field full of blossoming flowers, each vying for your

attention.

Some of these women were accompanied by big-bellied men several decades older than them. It was akin to a beautiful rose inserted into a pile of dung.

Nie Yan could understand why so many of his schoolmates were heartbroken, despising that they couldn't be born several decades earlier, after learning that Jiang Yingyu had married a wealthy older man.

Looking at his watch, it was almost 2 o'clock. Xie Yao would be arriving anytime now.

Nie Yan quietly sipped on his juice. The atmosphere settled down as people stopped chattering and looked toward the front of the hall, where a beautiful young lady had appeared. She wore a strapless white dress which looked elegant and dazzling under the lighting, accentuating her lithe figure and showing off her delicate, pale white shoulders. She looked like a flawless sculpture carved out of the finest jade without a single blemish.

She resembled a beautiful fairy that had descended from the heavens.

As soon as Xie Yao entered the hall, everyone's gazes focused on her. Many people couldn't help but secretly let out sighs of admiration. Her presence dimmed the beauty of all other women in the banquet hall, causing jealousy to surface in their hearts. Right now, Xie Yao was only 18 years old. One could imagine how beautiful she would become in a few more years.

Xie Yao was holding the hand of a tall man who looked to be around 40 years old. One could see some of his facial features in her, making it obvious he was her father. Her mother would be arriving a bit later.

There were also a few others nearby. They were Xie Yao's close kin.

Everyone clapped, and Xie Yao politely responded with a smile. Her gaze scanned through the crowd as if she were searching for someone. When she couldn't find who she was looking for, a hint of disappointment crossed her face.

The birthday celebrations were beginning.

Seeing so many people crowding around Xie Yao and her relatives, Nie Yan felt it wouldn't be too suitable for him to approach her right now.

Nie Yan's gaze swept past all the guests before focusing on a figure sitting across from him on the other side of the hall by a window. His mind trembled, his hand shaking on his glass, betraying the inner turmoil in his heart.

That person was around 40 years old. His tall stature gave him an imposing look. He wore casual attire, making him stand out among the crowd of finely dressed people. Even so, he still had a dignified air about him. Two men in black suits stood on either side of him. Concealed under their clothing were muscular bodies that could burst into action at any time. With but a glance, one could tell they were battled-hardened veterans. These were his two bodyguards.

Nie Yan couldn't be more familiar with this face. After all, it was the focus of his hatred in his past life!

Cao Xu!

Chapter 399 - Banquet

Nie Yan still vividly remembered the scene of himself camped out on that rooftop, pulling the trigger of his sniper rifle. The bullet shot straight through Cao Xu's head just as he was about to enter his private car, splattering brain matter all over the ground.

That single gunshot vented out all the rancor Nie Yan had built up for Cao Xu over the years.

Nie Yan's hatred for Cao Xu was no longer as intense in this life. After all, his parents were still alive. But if Cao Xu dared to harm anyone close to him, Nie Yan would make him pay!

Although Nie Yan was currently no match for the behemoth known as the Century Financial Group, he was slowly amassing more power. Eventually the day would come when he could rival their power!

Roughly 20% of the Century Financial Group's profits came directly from the virtual reality industry while another 70% were related. If their position as a hegemon in the industry was shaken, it would greatly damage their business.

A youngster who looked to be about 24 years old sat across from Cao Xu. He had an unruly smile on his face which attracted the attention of all surrounding ladies. This fellow was undoubtedly a lady killer with his pretty boy appearance.

A few women in revealing dresses went up to greet him. He greeted them back with a faint smile, displaying elegance and grace.

His eyes swept through the crowd before finally settling on the star of today's banquet, Xie Yao. Her unmatched beauty would make any man's heart race.

"So, Young Master Fan, what do you think? Interested?" Cao Xu gazed at the youth across from him with a meaningful smile.

“Not bad, a bit immature. Give it a few more years, and she’ll definitely grow up to be a world-class beauty,” Fan Yuan replied. He had to admit that Xie Yao, who was the focus of attention, was beautiful enough to move even his heart.

“She’s the young lady of the Dragonsoar Financial Group. By obtaining her you’ll receive the support of the Dragonsoar Financial Group, allowing you to crush all your rivals and inherit the Euro Fortune Financial Group. Your prospects will be limitless. Then it’ll be my turn to rely on you, my friend.” Cao Xu chuckled before taking a sip from his wine glass.

“Assuming that day comes, will you still be able to tolerate my presence?” Fan Yuan asked with a teasing smile. He knew better than to trust the word of a sly old fox like Cao Xu. They might be on friendly terms right now, but that was because he was weak, and Cao Xu had a financial interest in supporting him. If he ever came to pose a threat to the Century Financial Group one day, Cao Xu wouldn’t hesitate to eliminate him.

Cao Xu chuckled and placed his wine glass back down on the table.

“What are your thoughts on the Dragonsoar Financial Group supporting Asskickers United?” Cao Xu changed the subject.

“What thoughts? Asskickers United is nothing compared to my Angel Corps. It’s a pity the Viridian Empire is so far away from the Satreen Empire. Otherwise, in just 10 days, I’d crush them so badly they won’t even dare to step foot outside of Calore,” Fan Yuan stated arrogantly.

“Don’t underestimate the growth of Asskickers United, especially since they have the support of the Dragonsoar Financial Group,” Cao Xu warned. He had originally planned to sweep through and take over the entire Viridian Empire with the combined might of Victorious Return, Radiant Sacred Flame, Bloodlust Blades, Alliances of Mages, and Divine Protectors. However, this plan was

foiled by the emergence of Asskickers United. Victorious Return and Radiant Sacred Flame had lost their value, and Bloodlust Blades was on the verge of collapse as well. Although Alliance of Mages and Divine Protectors seemed powerful from the outside, unless they captured all the strongholds of their several neighbouring cities, they were still vulnerable. Given the population of Calore, the unimpeded growth of Asskickers United would spell a bleak future for both guilds. Asskickers United had completely disrupted his business operations in the Viridian Empire. Fortunately, the 20 or so properties he owned were enough to support Alliance of Mages and Divine Protectors. He had diverted most of his capital to Angel Corps and several other guilds in the Satreen Empire. What left him feeling disgruntled was this youth before him—Fan Yuan, the guild leader of Angel Corps as well as one of the heirs to the Euro Fortune Financial Group. He was too cunning, making him harder to manipulate.

Asskickers United's rise to power and subsequent growth was too astonishing. How could Cao Xu possibly not pay attention to them, especially so after they received the backing of the Dragonsoar Financial Group. With Asskickers United's assistance, the Dragonsoar Financial Group had gained the business districts of six Basic Strongholds and one Intermediate Stronghold. The Dragonsoar Financial Group's rapidly growing presence in the virtual reality industry was enough to even threaten the Century Financial Group!

Nie Yan was sitting too far away, so he couldn't hear what Cao Xu and Fan Yuan were talking about. However, he could tell it was related to Xie Yao, especially with the way Fan Yuan was looking at her. It made him feel extremely uneasy.

At this moment, Fan Yuan and Cao Xu stood up and walked over to Xie Yao and her father.

Although Xie Yao's father and Cao Xu greeted each other courteously with smiles, Nie Yan could sense the hostility between

them. It appeared Cao Xu hadn't come merely for the purpose of celebrating Xie Yao's birthday. He clearly had ulterior motives.

"Long time no see." Fan Yuan raised his glass in a refined manner to greet Xie Yao. "I remember you were only 12 years old the last time we met. The Euro Fortune Financial Group and Glory Financial Group had just finalized an important business deal. Who knew that little girl would grow into such a beauty in a short six years."

"You're flattering me. How is Auntie Fan these days?" Xie Yao politely replied.

Sensing the distance in Xie Yao's voice, Fan Yuan briefly froze up before letting out a small chuckle. "She's always talking about you. When will you be visiting Europe again? We can meet up, and I'll show you around."

Liu Rui was also in attendance at this banquet. But he no longer had the face to approach Xie Yao after recent events. Seeing Fan Yuan talk to her, hostility immediately surfaced on his face. He knew exactly who Fan Yuan was. This fellow's background wasn't that much inferior to his own. More importantly, Fan Yuan was one of the heirs to Euro Fortune, one of the largest financial groups in Europe, whose wealth even surpassed that of the Century Financial Group.

Fan Yuan raised his glass to Xie Yao's birthday, then started chatting with the others around him. He would occasionally include Xie Yao in the conversation, saying a few words to her. All in all, he appeared quite at ease.

Xie Yao was starting to get annoyed with Fan Yuan's chattering. Although he appeared refined and elegant on the surface, he was nothing but a playboy and a hypocrite. She would often hear about his sex scandals from others. She naturally didn't have any good feelings toward him.

Why hasn't Nie Yan arrived yet? Don't tell me, he forgot...? Xie

Yao felt somewhat anxious. She scanned around the banquet hall once more before spotting Nie Yan sitting on a sofa in a corner. Her face immediately lit up like the sun. He was here all along!

Nie Yan noticed Xie Yao looking over at him and greeted her back with a smile.

When he saw Xie Yao chatting with Fan Yuan just now, he felt a bit unhappy. But after seeing the bright expression on her face when she spotted him, his spirits lifted.

Fan Yuan was an experienced playboy. It was a pity Xie Yao wouldn't give him the time of day.

Just as Fan Yuan was about to say something, Xie Yao interrupted, "Please excuse me. I have something important to do."

Fan Yuan turned rigid as an awkward expression flitted across his face. However, he quickly recovered with a polite smile. "No problem, go on ahead."

Xie Yao made a beeline toward Nie Yan as people stepped aside to let her pass.

"Let's continue chatting, everyone." Fan Yuan smiled. Nevertheless, his gaze followed Xie Yao's back as she went to sit down with Nie Yan on the sofa. They were happily chatting together. Fan Yuan could tell Xie Yao's feelings for Nie Yan were genuine. It was like night and day compared to the polite, distant attitude she kept up with him. His expression turned cold.

The several women near him started gossiping.

"Who's that?"

"I don't know. He couldn't be Xie Yao's boyfriend, right?"

"Seems like it. Why else would they be chatting so happily?"

An older woman covered in heavy makeup and wearing a revealing dress shook her head. "That boy definitely isn't Yao

Yao's boyfriend. She's never once mentioned him to us before. You're all overthinking things. He's probably one of her classmates." She was Xie Yao's paternal aunt, Xie Yi.

Xie Yi had an incensed look on her face as she gazed at Xie Yao chatting with Nie Yan. This little girl is too much of a troublemaker! How can she do something like this on her birthday? She would often abuse her position as aunt to scold Xie Yao. Their relationship at home was far from cordial.

Xie Yao smiling and being cute with a boy left even Xie Yao's father baffled. She normally only acted this carefreely at home.

Xie Jun gazed at Nie Yan. I need to have a chat with this boy and see what his personality is like. Sadly, he was short on time right now. With so many people to greet, he couldn't move away from his spot. It would have to wait for later.

"Why are you sitting all the way over here? I was looking for you for so long but couldn't find you," Xie Yao pouted. She looked up and down at the leisure suit Nie Yan was wearing. He looked pretty prim and proper. She had only ever seen him wear casual clothes. "Who picked out these clothes for you?"

"Myself. I bought them at a shop called Rheims. It's my first time wearing this sort of stuff," Nie Yan replied with a smile.

"No wonder. Next time I'll go with you to buy clothes," Xie Yao declared. Her cheeks slightly flushed red as she thought about the deeper meaning behind her words.

"Alright." Nie Yan nodded, then dug out a small box from his pocket. "Here, this is for you. Happy birthday."

"What is it?" Xie Yao opened up the box and saw the necklace inside. "It's beautiful! Thank you, Nie Yan!"

Xie Yao directly wore the necklace. The gift itself was secondary to her. What mattered was that it was a present from Nie Yan. The delicate necklace sparkled brilliantly under the hall's lighting,

pairing well with her pale white skin. She looked like an angel descended from heaven.

Chapter 400 - Anger

“You look really beautiful today,” Nie Yan complimented as he stared into Xie Yao’s eyes. How she looked today was no doubt charming enough to move countless hearts and drive most men wild with lust.

Sensing Nie Yan’s burning gaze, Xie Yao didn’t dare to look him straight in the face. “You think so? I’m not used to wearing this kind of dress, I feel really awkward.” She was secretly elated by his compliment. If it weren’t for the fact she knew Nie Yan would be here today, there was no way she would’ve agreed to wear such a revealing dress.

Nie Yan started recalling the various events of his past life, becoming lost in a river of memories.

“Nie Yan, what are you thinking about?” Xie Yao asked, seeing Nie Yan with his head in the clouds.

“It’s nothing.” Nie Yan shook his head as a warm smile surfaced on his face.

The two chatted for a while before Xie Yao’s father called her over.

“I have to go. When the banquet ends, do you mind sending me home?” Xie Yao stared at Nie Yan.

“Sure.” Nie Yan nodded, then let out a chuckle. “Many men would kill for the opportunity to chauffeur such a beauty.”

Hearing Nie Yan’s teasing words, Xie Yao cutely pouted before walking back over to her father.

Nie Yan leaned back in the sofa, sipping on his glass of juice. Several women, who could best be described as snobbish, tried to approach him, but he couldn’t be bothered with them. He politely greeted them with a smile before shooing them away. Since they had seen him close to Xie Yao, they wanted to dig up his

background and use him to get closer to Xie Yao. He naturally wouldn't pay them any heed.

A while later, an older woman approached Nie Yan and sat down on the sofa beside him.

"You're Nie Yan?" she asked.

Nie Yan looked at the woman. She was wearing a low cut dress which was dangerously revealing. Her figure wasn't bad, but she was what men liked to call a butterface. Although she shared a slight resemblance with Xie Yao, it was akin to comparing a wilted corpse flower to a blooming lotus. She could only use heavy make-up to mask her coarse skin and elapsed youth. Even though she was only in her thirties, there were already numerous wrinkles on her face with noticeable crow's feet around the eyes.

"And you are?" Nie Yan didn't recall ever meeting this woman before. She was old enough to be his mother, yet she dressed so gaudily.

"I'm Xie Yao's aunt, Xie Yi," Xie Yi replied, then continued on in a haughty tone, "I already know who you are. You're one of my niece's classmates, Nie Yan."

Nie Yan wasn't happy with the tone Xie Yi was taking with him. But since she was Xie Yao's aunt, he held his tongue.

"I see... It's nice to meet you, Auntie," Nie Yan greeted.

"When did I say you could call me auntie?" Xie Yi sneered.

Returning courtesy and kindness with abuse, huh...? Nie Yan's eyes narrowed, staring coldly at Xie Yi. If it weren't for the fact she was Xie Yao's aunt, he would've long since cussed her out.

"Xie Yao is the young lady of the Dragonsoar and Glory Financial Groups. Do you honestly believe you're good enough for her? I've already investigated your background. I know your family only recently came into a bit of riches. You're nothing but new money. Do you really think you can climb up to the highest rung of society

by tricking Xie Yao into falling for you? Don't get too far ahead of yourself! Remember your status. The Dragonsoar and Glory Financial Groups will never allow a lowly peasant to marry their precious little princess!" Xie Yi coldly stated, obvious mocking in her tone.

Nie Yan clenched his fists in anger. He normally wouldn't tolerate this kind of behavior for long, especially from such a noisy person sticking their nose in where it didn't belong, preferring to shut them up early with more direct and physical methods. But he held himself back. One because she was a woman. Two because she was Xie Yao's aunt. Retaliating would reflect badly on Xie Yao. He owed her too much, both in his past and present life. For her sake, he endured this humiliation.

"Oh, did I happen to strike a nerve?" Xie Yi coldly smirked. "Do you want to hit me? Don't think you're so amazing just because you got into the Top Military Academy! Let me tell you something. The Top Military Academy means nothing to people like me, just another university, that's all. Compare yourself to some of Xie Yao's other pursuers. Liu Rui is the son of the second largest shareholder in the Dragonsoar Financial Group, and Fan Yuan is one of the heirs to the Euro Fortune Financial Group. Then look at you, simply a deluded toad dreaming of eating swan meat."

Nie Yan naturally knew this wasn't how Xie Yao felt. But that didn't make the words sting any less.

"Are you done?" Nie Yan stared at Xie Yi with an icy gaze.

Xie Yi was somewhat scared by the vicious look in Nie Yan's eyes. But after recalling the promise Fan Yuan gave her, she refused to back down.

"Not backing down, huh? Do you really think you're qualified to stand on equal footing with the Dragonsoar and Glory Financial Groups? Large financial groups only care about one thing, profit. If Xie Yao marries Liu Rui, the Dragonsoar Financial Group's

executive layer will become more united. If Xie Yao marries Fan Yuan, the Euro Fortune Financial Group will become closely tied to the Dragonsoar and Glory Financial Groups. What can you offer?" Xie Yi gazed at Nie Yan in disdain. "That's why you should just give up on getting together with Xie Yao!"

「Bang!」Nie Yan shattered the glass in his hand. Xie Yi's words had ruthlessly stabbed into his heart like steak knives. Venomous as they may be, they did carry a hint of truth. What could he offer Xie Yao? After all, he was a nobody right now.

Even though he had reincarnated in the past, he was still at the mercy of the flow of history. He could only accumulate power bit by bit. Even though he achieved a great many things in these past three months, he was nothing compared to the large financial groups that had weathered decades or even a century.

Xie Yi felt her scalp turn numb as her eyes widened in fear. She knew what Nie Yan shattered wasn't ordinary glass. Its hardness was comparable to a human skull. Recalling she had just incensed such a ferocious individual, she had an intense urge to bolt out of her seat right now. She couldn't help but worry if he was really brave enough to assault her here.

Xie Yi summoned up her courage, then continued on, "Fan Yuan is the young heir of the Euro Fortune Financial Group while you're just the mongrel son of some second-rate, upstart company's president. Take a look in the mirror. Don't you have any shame trying to latch on to the Dragonsoar Financial Group's thigh like some kind of parasite? Hmph!"

Nie Yan narrowed his eyes, flaring with killing intent. "Are you done? If so, get the hell out of my sight!"

"Vulgar brat! You don't know what's good for you! I wonder how your parents raised you. With just your lowly background, you should stay far away from Xie Yao! You and her live in different worlds!" Xie Yi didn't dare to stay any longer, rising up from her

seat and skittering away in haste.

Nie Yan sat on the sofa, his chest heaving in anger before gradually calming down. Xie Yao had stayed by his side through two lifetimes, so she clearly didn't share the same opinion as her aunt. But Xie Yi's piercing words still lingered in his mind. If he tried to pursue Xie Yao with his current status, he would be seen as nothing but a sponge trying to climb up the social ladder. Xie Yao might not care, but his pride as a man wouldn't allow it!

Nie Yan had no plans of leaving Xie Yao, since he would only be surrendering to Xie Yi's evil scheme and giving her what she wanted. He wondered who that vile woman was acting as a mouthpiece for.

When Xie Yi returned to the front of the banquet hall, she secretly exchanged glances with Fan Yuan. This naturally didn't escape Nie Yan's eyes. He coldly chuckled. He wasn't the type to easily let go of grudges.

Send people to sort Xie Yi out? Nie Yan wouldn't resort to such lowly methods. Not to mention as Xie Yao's aunt, she still had a bit of status in the Glory Financial Group. It would be tantamount to slapping the Glory Financial Group's face. Then his chances of getting with Xie Yao would become even more of an impossibility!

The best way to deal with these kinds of people was to one day rise above them, then crush them beneath your feet by throwing their own words back at them!

Nie Yan's enrollment into the Top Military Academy was equivalent to a protective talisman. All he needed to do was bide his time. He would have plenty of opportunities in the future to make himself stronger!

Nie Yan's heart softened as he gazed at Xie Yao. She had watched over him for so long in his past life. If he wasn't strong enough to keep her by his side in this life, he would be an utter failure as a man. If one day the Dragonsoar and Glory Financial Groups

refused to let him marry Xie Yao, what could he do? The only option was to force them to yield with absolute power!

Nie Yan didn't have much time. Nevertheless, every step he took so far was firm and steady.

Nie Yan took out his phone and called up Tang Yao.

「What's up? Did you get your acceptance letter yet?」Tang Yao excitedly asked after picking up.

「Yep, came in the mail this morning.」

「You sure are amazing. Back in Ninjiang, your grades ranked in the top five at best. Who knew you would be so amazing all of a sudden. My old man even praised me. He said I might be a failure for not getting into the Top Military Academy, but at least I have a good eye for friends. He even gifted me my own Taiga Black!」

Nie Yan chuckled. It seemed Tang Yao's father was in a really good mood. A Taiga Black certainly wasn't cheap.

「Do you remember what I told you to do about Wei Kai? Any updates?」Nie Yan asked.

「That brat would love nothing more than to latch onto our coattails. But he's a wolf. He might be useful to send against our enemies, but I'm worried one day he'll turn around and bite us in the butt,」Tang Yao said in a somewhat worried tone.

「It's fine. If he has even half a brain, he wouldn't dare.」

「Since you're set on using him, let me know when you're free. I'll set up the meeting between you two.」

「Tell him he'll have to stop some of his shadier practices,」Nie Yan said.

「I already have. That brat knows his limits.」

Nie Yan had always been meaning to meet up with Wei Kai. However, he never had the time. In the past, he didn't have any interest in helping his father operate the family company. But if he

wanted to be worthy of Xie Yao, he would have to focus his efforts on growing the business into an entity rivalling the Glory Financial Group, Dragonsoar Financial Group, and Century Financial Group. His father had recently been secretly eating away at the shares of the Century Financial Group. He wondered how that was progressing.

Asskickers United had to put more effort into propping up the War God Tribe too. After all, the War God Tribe was the foundation of the Nie Family's future. Acquiring more strongholds was the only way they could stably grow their share in the virtual reality industry. The Nie Family's current resources could support three Basic Strongholds at most. Any more would have to wait until they accrued more capital since the investment required for each real-world business district was steep.

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